

THE UNCLE WE DIDN'T KNOW

by Jim Stewart

3rd Edition

July 2023



*"Bright white and standing squarely,
On parade grounds of tended green.
The markers of the lost are found,
Where they can be always seen.*

*They stand guard as a reminder,
Of a price they had to pay.
For a liberty and freedom,
That we all enjoy today¹."*

¹ 'Portland Stone' by Dave Capps, © 2014.

1 - Introduction

We know very little about Uncle Jack's life and never will because the people who could tell us about him are all dead. However, there is one part of his life we can get to know – the time between him joining the RAF and the day he died. The military keeps detailed records of its people and events and now the records from World War 2 are available to the public. So, when I knew that I was finally about to visit his grave, I set out to build a picture of the 20-month period in Uncle Jack's life from the end of March 1939 to early December 1940.

I've written more about his time in Egypt and Greece than about his training and service in the UK because there's more information available about the former. Here's a list of the abbreviations I've used and my sources – some of whom were in the same place at the same time as Uncle Jack. If you want to go straight to the story, then skip to page 3 and 'Uncle Jack before the War'

- RAF Record of Service, or Form 543 (F543). Uncle Jack's F543, which I obtained from Air-COSPers-Disclosures@mod.gov.uk via a GOV.UK web site, provided the details of his Training, information about him and his life before he enlisted.
- Squadron Operations Record Books, or Forms 540 (F540) and Detail of Work Carried Out, or Form 541 (F541).
 - Every unit in the RAF was/is required to maintain an Operations Record Book, or F540, listing the major events which occur each month.
 - In time of war, they were/are also required to maintain a Detail of Work Carried Out, or F541, a record of each combat flying operation, identification numbers of the aircraft involved, crews' names, when they took off and landed, their target and comments about the operation.
 - I was able to download the F's540 and 541 for the 10 weeks Uncle Jack spent on No. 21 Squadron (Sqn.), his first operational posting.
 - Uncle Jack's next, and final, posting was to No. 211 Sqn. By sheer good luck I stumbled across a web site about 211 Sqn. (see below) and was able to access the F's540 and 541 for the 15 weeks Uncle Jack was there.
 - These documents were compiled under difficult conditions. The Sqns. were learning how to operate in wartime while accommodated in temporary quarters or tents. So, there are gaps and omissions e.g., 211 Sqn's F540 for June 1940 doesn't mention the Sqn's first wartime operation and there's no trace of the F541 for that month.
- 211squadron.org This web site is a truly excellent resource. It was built, and is maintained, by Don Clark whose father served on 211 Sqn., when Uncle Jack was there. Sergeant (Sgt.) Clark completed 55 operations with 211 Sqn. and survived the war. My interest in the Sqn. is limited to the time that Uncle Jack spent there and so I've focused only on content related to that period. However, I'd suggest you look the site over. I've included [hyperlinks](#) to (hopefully all of) the pages I've used.
- Don Clark has spent hours and hours of his time giving me help and advice. He has:
 - Given me innumerable tips e.g., how to access 21 Sqn's Fs540/541 and tried to track down Blenheim Delivery Flights (BDFs).
 - Used his time and resources to obtain the Casualty file for the incident in which Uncle Jack was killed; tried to find out if a pilot with whom Uncle Jack flew survived the war and if Uncle Jack was on a BDF; and passed a number of sources and ideas to me so that I can continue the search.
 - Sent me a copy of "Wings Over Olympus" (see below).
 - Introduced me to Ian Carter, Editor of the [Blenheim Society](#) Journal.
- Ian Carter has also been generous with his time and knowledge. He:
 - Sent me a copy of "Blenheim Over The Balkans" (see below).
 - Is looking through his photographs for any in which Uncle Jack appears.

- Introduced me to Nigel Davies-Williams.
- Nigel Davies-Williams has also gone far 'above and beyond' the call of duty to help. He:
 - Wrote "Gerald's War" (see below).
 - Sent me detailed instructions for finding a Blenheim from 211 Sqn. in which his uncle, Gerald Davies, was the Observer/Navigator and which crash landed on Corfu.
- 'Wings Over Olympus' – by T.H. Wisdom, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1942 tells the story of the RAF in Egypt and Greece in 1940 and 1941.
 - Before the war T. H. (Tommy) Wisdom was a motoring journalist (with the Daily Herald) and a racing driver.
 - He was one of a number War Correspondents appointed to commissions in the Admin. and Special Duties Branch of the RAF Reserve/Reserve of Air Force Officers.
 - Shortly after he arrived in Egypt in August 1940, he met one of the 211 Sqn. pilots he had known before the war and had himself attached to the Sqn. He lived with them in the field and flew on several operations.
 - When he became Chief Press Officer in Greece he maintained his close links to 211 Sqn., the relationship continuing until everyone was evacuated from Greece.
 - The book was written while his experiences were fresh in his mind.
 - He describes the pilot with whom Uncle Jack was flying when he was killed.
 - The book has been out of print for a long time, but a few copies can be found using www.bookfinder.com
- 'Blenheim Over The Balkans' by James Dunnett, Pentland Books, 2001
 - James Dunnett joined the RAF in January 1939 as a Sergeant Observer, flew 89 operations and survived the War.
 - The book is a factual, personal record of 211 Sqn. from the time he and Uncle Jack were members of the Sqn. until the end of the War.
 - [Dunnett](#) and Uncle Jack first crossed paths when he was on 57 Sqn. and Uncle Jack was on 21 Sqn. On 211 Sqn. Dunnett's crew flew on 3 of the same operations as Uncle Jack, including Uncle Jack's last one.
 - This book can also be found via www.bookfinder.com
- 'Gerald's War' by Nigel Davies-Williams was published in 2021.
 - This is the true story of Gerald Davies, Nigel's uncle, who was also on 211 Sqn. at the same time as Uncle Jack.
 - [Gerald](#) and Uncle Jack flew, in separate crews, on 5 operations including Uncle Jack's final raid. Gerald was killed on 13 Apr 41.
 - The events described in the book are accurate and the characters existed. However, Nigel believed it was best to structure Gerald's story as historical fiction. So, some of the circumstances and conversations are dramatized.
 - Uncle Jack is mentioned by name on the bottom half of page 321 when his death forms part of the narrative (Ignore the reference to Uncle Jack being nicknamed 'Pickers', it was the nickname of the pilot of the second aircraft which crashed that day.) Uncle Jack's service information, his age and the location of his grave are mentioned on page 330.
 - 'Gerald's War' is available on the [Amazon web site](#).
- Wikipedia and other web sites. There's a wealth of information in Wikipedia and various other sites on the web. I've extracted and used only information that gives an insight into what Uncle Jack's life would have been like. Once again I've included [hyperlinks](#) to the sites I've used in case you want to read more.
- Family Members' Memories. While I was writing the 1st Edition a few anecdotes turned up, dredged from various people's memories, and were included. When I circulated the 1st Edition to the family a letter and several additional photographs were discovered. They formed the basis of the 2nd Edition. This Edition simply corrects typos in the prior two.

- NOTE. Don Clark reminded me that no source is completely without error, including his own work.
 - James Dunnett says, "*Scrutiny of sources available from 'Official Records' can...be counterproductive and lead to the fallacy of quoting 'facts'....*"²
 - Nigel Davies-Williams comments "*I have used records from many sources to piece together as accurate a story as possible...There will be omissions and forgive me if there are some inaccuracies.*"³
 - I am just as fallible as these 3 wise gentlemen.

You'll see that there are 'Unanswered Questions' at the end of some sections. It is not, and never was, my intention to find answers to these questions. I put them there to help us think about Uncle Jack's life – and, most of all, to get us talking about him.

2 - Uncle Jack before the War

Uncle Jack was born at 4 Rose Lane, Lossiemouth on Thursday, 29 June 1919 at 6:30 in the evening⁴. The name on his birth certificate is John Munro.

His RAF Record of Service, F543, contains 4 pieces of interesting information about him and his life before he enlisted.

- When Uncle Jack left school he worked at Carries, a retail grocer, on Queen Street in Lossiemouth for 4 years, from March 1935 to March 1939.
 - I remember being told by Granny and Granda Munro, that, on April Fool's Day 1935, someone at Carries sent Uncle Jack out to buy some tartan ink. He went and came back laughing.
- He spent 4 years as a Seaforth Highlander in the Territorial Army (TA), from 23 Mar 34 (when he was not quite 15 years old) until 22 Mar 39.
- On enlistment, Uncle Jack was 5 feet 7 and a half inches tall, had a 33-inch chest, fair hair, blue eyes and a fresh complexion. He had 2 vaccination scars and 1 other scar of unspecified origin on his left arm.
- His home address was 64 Dunbar Street, Lossiemouth meaning that, by March 1939 the family had moved.



² 'Blenheim Over The Balkans, page xiii - Preface

³ 'Gerald's War', page 464, Chapter Thirty-six, 'From The Author'

⁴ Jim Young's genealogical research

3 – Enlistment and Training

On 28 March 1939 Uncle Jack enlisted in the RAF for a period of 6 years. His F543, and low service number, confirm that he was a member of the regular RAF. Recruitment of full-time airmen for the [Regular RAF](#) continued until 24 August 1939. The [RAF Volunteer Reserve \(RAFVR\)](#) was established 1936 for the part-time training of aircrew, including Wireless Operators.)



No. 2 Depot - Basic Training

Uncle Jack began his training at No. 2 Depot, [RAF Cardington](#), in Bedfordshire. He was there for 10 weeks, until 9 Jun 39. [No. 2 School of Recruit Training](#) was set up in Oct 1937. Extra barracks and air raid shelters were added in Oct 1938. When Uncle Jack arrived, there were around 200 trainees at the Depot; it was the largest recruit training establishment in the country; and it had the best instructors in the RAF. He would have completed training in drill, physical training, anti-gas measures, education, handling aircraft, and 'musketry'.

No. 2 E&WS (Electrical & Wireless School)

After basic training Uncle Jack was posted to 1 Wing, No. 2 Electrical & Wireless School, [RAF Yatesbury](#) in Wiltshire. He was there from 9 Jun to 1 Dec 39 (25 weeks). In 1938 the RAF realised it would need a large number of radio operators and so No. 2 E&WS was built. Uncle Jack would have lived and worked in wooden huts.⁵ The theory of wireless and Morse code was taught on the ground and the [Dominie](#) was used for [aerial training](#).

Entry in Uncle Jack's F543 - 25 Nov 39 - Qualified as a Wireless Operator "Class B" and was 'part trained tele/op'

Headquarters Holding

Uncle Jack was placed on 'Headquarters Holding', from the beginning of Dec 39 until the end of Feb 40, probably because he had to wait for a place on a Bombing and Gunnery course. He remained at RAF Yatesbury (no unit specified) for those 12 weeks and would have been assigned to any duties that had to be completed for which there was no one available. Just prior to this entry in his F543 there's one which looks like a move to Lerwick. It's been crossed out (making it difficult to read) and 'Not Issued' appears alongside it.

⁵ Uncle Jack is at bottom left, front row, arms folded in the photo. Could the wooden hut in background be at RAF Yatesbury? Photo is from Uncle Lewis' papers.



Perhaps he was intended to spend his holding period in Shetland (although there never was an RAF Lerwick).

Entry in Uncle Jack's F543 – 31 Dec 39 - Annual review – his Rank was AC2⁶ (Aircraftman Second Class), his character was Very Good, his Trade was Wireless Operator, and his Proficiency was Satisfactory.

No. 5 B & GS (Bombing & Gunnery School)

His course at No. [5 Bomber & Gunnery School RAF Jurby](#) (on the Isle of Man) finally began on 2 Mar 40 and he completed it 7 weeks later on 20 Apr 40. Some of the aircraft used for Uncle Jack's training e.g., [the Handley Page Heyford](#) (a biplane) had come from front line Sqns. as they were replaced by new models, but there were also newer aircraft - including the Bristol Blenheim I. Air firing was practised on drogues towed behind single-engine aircraft specially adapted for the purpose e.g., [the Westland Wallace](#) (another biplane).

Entry in Uncle Jack's F543 – 13 Apr 40 - Qualified as a Wireless Operator/Air Gunner

No. 17 OTU (Operational Training Unit)

Uncle Jack completed his training at [RAF Upwood](#) in Cambridgeshire from 20 Apr to 12 Jun 40 (7.5 weeks). [No. 17 OTU](#) was formed in April 1940 (making Uncle Jack's course one of the first) to train medium bomber crews using the Bristol Blenheim. The rain and general dampness in that area frequently made the grass airfield unserviceable, curtailing or halting flying training, and it is possible Uncle Jack's course may have been affected. At the OTU Uncle Jack had his first experience of the dangers related to his new line of work - 4 aircraft crashed, and [5 aircrew were killed](#) while he was there.

Entry in Uncle Jack's F543 – 27 May 40 - Promoted to Sergeant

Entry in Uncle Jack's F543 – 12 Jun 40 - 17 OTU Final Report (Blenheim) - Average

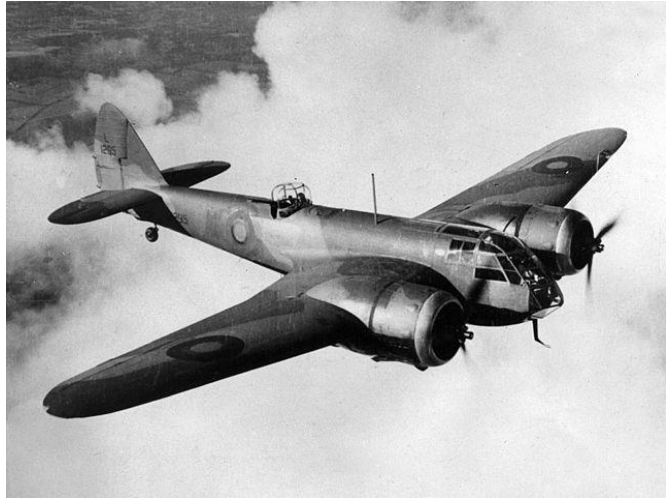
Unanswered question.

Did the deaths at the OTU bring home the reality of the risks he was taking to Uncle Jack? Or did he just believe that it would never happen to him?

⁶ There are no rank badges on his uniform so the photo could have been taken early in his training. I can't trace how this photo came into my hands, but I think it was from Peter Marr via Jack Marr.

4 – Uncle Jack and the Bristol Blenheim I⁷

When Uncle Jack was posted to the Blenheim OTU he was selected to fly in one of the RAF's newer aircraft. Deliveries of the [Bristol Blenheim I](#), a medium bomber which carried a crew of 3, had only started in March 1937. It was one of the first British aircraft with an all-metal stressed-skin construction, retractable landing gear, flaps, a powered gun turret and variable-pitch propellers. The prototype from which it was developed was fast for that time but the conversion to military use added 20%-25% more weight. That, and the rapid performance increases in enemy fighters, eliminated any speed advantage and the [Blenheim's](#) light armament was seldom able to deter the better equipped fighters.



By 1939 the Blenheim I was moving from Sqn. service to use by training units in the U.K. or as replacements in the Middle and Far East. By 1940 in Europe, and by 1941 overseas, the Blenheim I's place as a fast medium day bomber had been eclipsed by later developments.

Bristol figures showed a maximum full-load speed of 265 mph at 10,000 ft for the Blenheim I. But by 1941 (or even late 1940 when Uncle Jack was flying in them), ageing operational aircraft could not have achieved this speed in level flight. In action, fully laden aircraft on a long sortie might cruise at 180 mph or 200mph for around 5 hours.

The Pilot's quarters, on the left side of the nose, were so cramped that the control yoke obscured all flight instruments while engine instruments eliminated the forward view on landings. The Observer/Navigator was seated alongside the pilot, but moved forward to a sliding/folding seat when acting as bomb aimer.



Uncle Jack, the Wireless Operator/Air Gunner, sat behind them perched on a saddle seat in the turret⁸, which was operated hydraulically and made by Daimler⁹. He had to reach around the gun pillar to operate the radio, tuning coils etc., which were mounted immediately aft of the turret. He would have had to cope with the draught which even blew through his helmet and flying suit.¹⁰ I was able to sit in the Wireless Operator/Air Gunner's position in a Blenheim and it is neither spacious nor comfortable. Getting in and out would have taken quite a lot of practice.

⁷ Photograph of Blenheim I by Canadian Forces, expired crown copyright, all images made by Canadian forces more than 50 years ago., Now Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1627370>

⁸ Photograph by Hensser H (Mr), RAF official photographer - # CM 285 from the collection of the Imperial War Museum. Now Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=21558229>

⁹ "Wings Over Olympus", page 46 – Chapter Four – We are Bombed.

¹⁰ 'Blenheim Over The Balkans', page 82 – Chapter XI – The Fall of Argyrokastro

Uncle Jack was armed with a single .303in. Vickers VGO machine gun compared to the [Fiat CR.42](#) with 1x.303in. and 1x.50in. machine guns; the twin .50in. machine guns of the [Fiat G.50](#) and (much faster) [Maachi C200](#). (The Blenheim also had a single, forward-firing, .303in. Browning machine gun outboard of the port engine.)

A 1,000lb bomb load (usually 4 x 250lb bombs) was carried in the internal bomb bay in the centre section of the fuselage. The bomb bay doors were kept closed with bungee cords and opened under the weight of the released bombs. Bombing accuracy was poor since it was impossible to predict how long it would take for the bombs to force the doors open.

Despite being aware of the Blenheim's shortcomings Uncle Jack and the other aircrew who flew in it continued to take their aircraft out on operations day after day. In January 1941, one month after Uncle Jack's death, the under-powered, under-gunned and under-bombed Blenheim was classified as inadequate in terms of performance and armament for current operations. However, Blenheims continued to operate widely in combat roles until 1943.

"The vulnerable Blenheims of 211 Sqn. were protected...by the [Gloster Gladiators](#) from 80 Sqn....despite these planes looking like they would be better suited to flying over the trenches of the Somme in the Great War."

"Gerald's War", pages 199 and 200

"Gerald...felt pretty vulnerable...The Blenheim was no match for the speed and firepower of a Messerschmitt 109...."

"Gerald's War" page 186

5 - No. 21 Sqn. and back to Lossie.

Uncle Jack's first operational posting, from 12 Jun 40 to 22 Aug 40, was to No. 21 Sqn. at RAF Watton in Norfolk. He spent 8 of those 10 weeks back at Lossiemouth.

Background. [21 Sqn.](#) began to take delivery of Bristol Blenheim I's¹¹ in August 1938. For a brief but excellent first-hand account of life as a Sergeant Wireless Operator/Air Gunner on the Sqn., see '[Extracts from the 1940 Diary of Jack Bartley](#)' and '[Eclipse of an Air Gunner](#)' by Jack Bartley'.



On 23 Jun 40, 11 days after Uncle Jack's arrival, the Sqn. moved to RAF Lossiemouth.

Their role was to attack German shipping off Norway and to deter an invasion across the North Sea.

¹¹ Photograph of Blenheim I and crew in period dress by [Brian Marshall](#)



This was a lucky move for Uncle Jack for 2 reasons. One, he was able to spend some time with Granny, Granda and the brothers and sister still at home¹²

The second reason was summed up this way, "*From June to October 1940, No. 21 Sqn. was loaned to Coastal Command operating out of Lossiemouth thus largely escaping the slaughter that befell most Blenheim bomber Sqns. during that summer.*"¹³ Even so, 21 Sqn. saw its share of casualties e.g., they lost 9 aircraft (27 men) while Uncle Jack was with them.

While the ratio of enemy aircraft shot down to Blenheim's lost was very poor, rear gunners like Uncle Jack could be effective e.g., 1 crew claimed 2 enemy aircraft shot down during a raid over France on 11 Jun 40 and the only aircraft to return from the daylight raid on Stavanger on 9 Jul 40 shot down an ME 109.

Uncle Jack completed 2 operations with No. 21 Sqn.¹⁴:

Date	Aircraft	Crew	Destination	Time	Remarks
10 Jul 40	Blenheim 1 6954.D	Sgt. Hutt Sgt. Aldridge Sgt. Munro	Stavanger aerodrome	2215-2240	Ordered to attack Stavanger aerodrome. Section took off at 2215 but were forced to return due to adverse weather conditions.
12 Aug 40	Blenheim 1 6954.D	Sgt. Hutt Sgt. Pollard Sgt. Munro	North Sea	0810-1045	North Sea sweep carried out by 6 aircraft. 2 groups of RN and Merchant ships (convoys?) spotted

NOTES.

- Why was there almost a month between Uncle Jack's arrival and his first operation?
 - The Sqn. carried out raids in France until 15 Jun 40 and Don Clark suggested it was possible that new crews were tasked on other flying duties in order to gain experience before taking part in more exposed operations over France.

¹² Uncle Jack, Granny and Uncle Lewis outside 64 Dunbar Street. Note Jack's Sergeant stripes and W/AG brevet. Photo from Uncle Lewis' papers.

¹³ <https://web.archive.org/web/20061009174651/http://www.raf.mod.uk/bombercommand/s31.html>

¹⁴ AIR-27-263-20 No. 21 Sqn detail for 9 and 10 Jul and AIR-27-263-22 No. 21 Sqn. detail from 4 to 24 Aug

- Training (type unspecified) took place on 3 days between 16 – 22 Jun 40 and, since training flights were not recorded in the F541, it's impossible to tell if Uncle Jack was on them.
 - 4 days were taken up by the move to Lossiemouth and setting up there.
 - 3 days were spent doing formation training. Uncle Jack may have been involved
 - The F540 records 2 sweeps of the North Sea in late June, but there are no entries in the Fs541, so Uncle Jack may have been on them.
 - Between 1 and 8 Jul 40, one day was lost to bad weather, but Uncle Jack might have flown during:
 - 6 days' training which included bombing practice on Innes Links Range, section attacks on Rona Island, sea navigation, formation practice and practice attacks on an aerodrome.
 - 2 more North Sea sweeps for which there were no entries in the Fs541.
 - On 9 Jul 40 the Sqn. took part in a daylight raid on Stavanger airfield with the loss of 5 aircraft and 15 crew members. Uncle Jack was not involved – unlike Sgt. James Dunnet, author of "Blenheim Over The Balkans" who was on No. 57 Sqn. at RAF Lossiemouth.
2. Why was there another month-long gap between his first and second operation?
- During the remainder of July, 9 days were lost to bad weather. Training lectures on e.g., gunnery and ship recognition were held on those days. But Uncle Jack may have flown on the:
 - 12 days spent on training in bombing, navigation, night flying, formation flying, instrument flying and defence against fighters.
 - 3 North Sea sweeps which went unrecorded in the Fs541.
 - Between 1 and 12 Aug 40, two days were lost to bad weather
 - There were 4 North Sea sweeps in which Uncle Jack did not participate.
 - 5 days were spent training on navigation, bombing, formation flying and gunnery.
3. Two other reasons for the gaps may have been aircraft serviceability/availability; or, since there tended to be more crews than aircraft on a Sqn., and the number of aircraft/crews required on an operation was determined by command staff at Wing or higher, Uncle Jack may not have been required.

Unanswered questions.

- Uncle Jack flew with Sgt. Hutt twice and with Sgt. Pollard once while he was on 21 Sqn. The 3 of them flew together 5 more times on 211 Sqn. in Egypt and Uncle Jack and Sgt. Pollard flew together a sixth time in Egypt. Were the 3 of them at the OTU at RAF Upwood together or were they put together as a crew on 21 Sqn?
- What was Uncle Jack thinking when he was setting out on the Stavanger raid the day after 5 aircraft had been lost? Did Granny and Granda have any idea of how dangerous things were for him?

6 - Posting from 21 Sqn. to 211 Sqn.

I haven't been able to find out how Uncle Jack made his way to the Middle East.

An entry in his F543 on 22 Aug 40 reads "Moved To - Middle East". An entry 4 days later states he was "Moved To - R.O.R.P". Don Clark told me this probably should have been R&RP – a Reinforcement & Reserve Pool (R&RP) was formed in June 40 at RAF Ismailia as a holding place for aircrew until they were needed by operational Sqns. The next F543 entry says '211 Sqn.' but it has no "Moved To" date. There is no record of Uncle Jack's (or Sgts.

Hutt and Pollard's) arrival on the Sqn. However, 211 Sqn.'s F541 records that on 9 Sep 40 the 3 of them flew their first operation.

Assuming Uncle Jack left 21 Sqn. on his movement date, he would have spent exactly 2 weeks and 4 days 'in transit' (22 Aug - 9 Sep 40). That seems very little time to have travelled from Lissiemouth to a port of embarkation (Liverpool, Southampton?); sailed, presumably in a convoy (no waiting for one to be assembled?) to Egypt; travelled from his port of arrival (Port Said?) to El Daba and become ready for operations. Uncle Jack may also have had embarkation leave (even 48 hours) and may have had to draw khaki uniforms and Middle East kit both of which would have consumed some of that 'transit' time.

Another possibility is that Uncle Jack could have left 21 Sqn. after flying on 12 Aug 40 but before 22 Aug 40. That would add up to 9 more days for the journey, (3 weeks and 4 days) making a voyage by sea more possible. Don Clark's father's experience is interesting. He boarded a troopship in Liverpool on 24 Jul 40; sailed the next morning (via Freetown, Cape Town, Durban and Aden); disembarked in Port Said; and joined No. 211 Sqn. on 5 Sep 40. The total time from sailing to joining the Sqn. was exactly 6 weeks. A voyage through the Mediterranean (via Gibraltar) would have taken less time. In 1940 it would not have been idyllic, but it would not have been as dangerous as it was to become. [A list of convoys](#) on the web is of no help.

It is possible that, rather than travelling by troopship, Uncle Jack flew on a Blenheim Delivery Flight (BDF) from the UK to Egypt. [By September 1940](#) the Blenheim Sqns. in the Middle East had been operating against the Italians for 3 months and replacement aircraft were being delivered by over-flying (now hostile) France. On 24 Sep 40, after 48 hours leave, Sgt. James Dunnet and his crew ferried 1 of 3 Blenheim IVs from the UK to Malta and then on to Egypt. They arrived in RAF Ismailia on 25 Sep 40 and by 3 Oct 40 Dunnet and his crew had been posted to No. 211 Sqn¹⁵.

If Uncle Jack did go this way it was a very risky trip. The first leg, from the UK to Malta, took the Blenheim to the very limits of its range and so only aircraft that had proved they had very low fuel consumption were taken. Maximum endurance for the trip was considered to be 7 hours and 15 minutes but Dunnet's crew were in the air for 8 hours and 55 minutes. Theirs was the only 1 of the 3 aircraft to arrive safely in Malta. The second leg, from Malta to Ismailia, was shorter, less susceptible to poor weather and included a flight around the pyramids.

There was no GPS or radar. Navigation was by 'dead reckoning' - plot the course on a map, adjust for forecasted winds and then recalculate in flight as visual markers were observed. As a navigator, James Dunnet had a roll of maps, mechanical 'computers', pencils and rulers. The weather and phase of the moon (for visibility) were critical. Even with a good forecast Dunnet's crew spent 4 hours being thrown around in a massive electrical thunderstorm, at one point preparing to bail out. They also flew through enemy searchlights and flack directed at a British air raid on Le Havre.

After James Dunnet's flight direct flights across France were cancelled and subsequent ferry flights went first to Gibraltar and then on to Malta.

The Blenheim was a noisy, cramped and uncomfortable aircraft even for short flights and this was an extended ferry flight. It was cold over the UK and Europe. They needed [Irvin Jackets](#) (brown leather jackets, lined with sheepskin) or [Sidcot Suits](#) (a one-piece khaki twill

¹⁵ 'Blenheim Over The Balkans', pages 15-24 - Chapter III, Night Flight To Malta.

proofed cotton outer with a rubberized cotton interlining and 'fur' lining) for warmth. However, as soon as they encountered the Mediterranean sun they were far too hot! Dunnet's crew were issued with tropical clothing and tinted goggles before leaving Malta.

There's an interesting entry in 211 Sqn.'s F540 during Uncle Jack's 'in transit' period. On 5 Sep 40 two replacement aircrews arrived from [Abu Sueir](#), an RAF airfield approx. 91km south of Port Said.

Don Clark has now checked all of the likely sources for information on BDF's from the UK to Middle East, with a particular focus on September to November/December 1940 with no success. My guess, based solely on the time between him leaving the UK and arriving in Egypt, is that Uncle Jack was on one of those BDF's.

7 – No. 211 Sqn.

1. Africa

Background. [No. 211 Sqn.](#) began to re-equip with Bristol Blenheim I's in April 1939 and moved to its "war station", at [RAF El Daba](#), located 180 km west of Alexandria, the same month (follow this [link](#) and scroll up for photos). In mid-July 1940 the Sqn. moved to 'Qotaiyya' (Qotafiyah) located, according to the F540, *"to the WNW of Daba.....and directly on the coast"*, the new site being *"superior in every way to the present site at Daba"* and much cooler. Another F540 entry, at the end of Jul 40, said that *"Moved to new camp site beside the sea and a noticeable improvement in health was noticed almost immediately. The morale of the camp has also shown great improvement."*

Most of us know how the war in Europe unfolded but, if you're like me, you may not know that the [North African campaign](#) began when Italy entered the War on 10 Jun 40. British troops based in Egypt immediately launched pre-emptive strikes on targets in Libya. [RAF Headquarters Middle East](#) (HQME), was in Egypt and RAF units were involved from the outset, attacking airfields, supply dumps and ports, including Tobruk. 211 Sqn. took part in operations against the Italians in Libya and the Western Desert from 11 Jun 40 onwards, suffering its first fatalities when a crew was lost on 22 Jul 40. However, 211's casualties in Africa were lighter than those of 21 Sqn in the UK. Sqn.Ldr. Tommy Wisdom, who set out for North Africa less than a week after being "kicked out of" France, quickly realized that the situation facing 211 Sqn. in Egypt was the same as the bombers of 1 Group had faced during the Battle of France – *"our aircraft were slower, not so well armed as those of the enemy, and, of course, we were also greatly outnumbered"*.¹⁶

On 10 Sep 40 the Italians launched an offensive with the goal of [reaching the Suez Canal](#). However, they were halted, and dug in around Sidi Barrani on 16 Sep 40.

Uncle Jack in Africa. When Uncle Jack arrived in Qotafiyah in September 1940 [average temperatures](#) were 29°C during the day and 20°C overnight – quite a change from the northeast of Scotland. *"It's HOT! HOT AND STICKY."* was James Dunnet's reaction on arriving at the end of September and he complained that his RAF issue, thick woolen khaki shirt glued itself to his parboiled skin (no sunscreen in those days)! In addition to the heat Uncle Jack would have had to deal with the 'none too delicate aroma'; the 'persistent,

¹⁶ "Wings Over Olympus", page 21 – Chapter 1 – Looking for the War in the East

tenacious and pugnacious Egyptian fly¹⁷; the gippy-tummy *"that keeps every newcomer within sprinting distance of the bathroom for a couple of days"*¹⁸; snakes; and sandstorms.

Living conditions were pretty basic. Uncle Jack would have slept in a tent strapped down with sturdy guy ropes (presumably because of the sandstorms)¹⁹ in a sleeping bag on a camp bed. Lockers, wash basins and even a shower (made from old petrol tins and empty packing cases) were provided with a little ingenuity. There were good things, however - a long, sandy beach a few minutes' walk away offered a cool swim in the Mediterranean. Evenings brought a gentle breeze to *"bathe the body"*, often whipped raw by a choking, blinding sandstorm during the day, and the soft dusk was a *"salve to smarting eyes"*.²⁰

The Italians followed 211 Sqn's. aircraft back from raids to return the favour by bombing them. Although that rarely occurred during the day, because the Italians knew that Hurricanes had arrived to supplement the fighter protection provided by Gloster Gladiators, they would have disturbed Uncle Jack's sleep every moonlit night. During the raids, he, like everyone else on 211, would have taken cover in a slit trench dug close to his tent. In addition to the usual high explosive bombs the Italians dropped a new weapon the RAF nicknamed the 'thermos flask' because of its size. They only exploded when the vibration of a lorry or truck or a kick from some unsuspecting airman set them off.²¹

And what about the stress of operations on Uncle Jack? Tommy Wisdom described the *"miserable period of waiting for the take-off...you fiddle with your equipment...ask fitters and riggers unnecessary questions...and all the time you have a nasty empty feeling below your belt"*²². James Dunnet talks about the *"tense, belly-knotted feeling"* as they approached a target; wondering how they managed to avoid being hit by the black bursts of flack; running for the shelter of cloud after dropping their bombs in case fighters appeared; finding his brow and the palms of his hands wet with sweat as they made for home; and appreciating the first cool drink in the Mess when they landed²³. For Gerald Davies the fear only kicked in when they dropped their bombs - to a man they wanted to get away as soon as possible - and during long periods of inactivity. When they had fighter cover it was provided by Gloster Gladiators of 80 Sqn.²⁴

Sqn.Ldr. Wisdom described a bombing raid as dull monotonous affair, a grind and added, matter-of-factly, that if fighters appear in numbers, it was unlikely that they would get back. He then commented on the casual acceptance of the usualness of bombing raids by the crews of 211 Sqn. and said that he never heard any member of a crew suggest they were doing something brave.²⁵

Uncle Jack's operations in Africa. Uncle Jack was a member of 'B' Flight, and first appears in the [F541](#) on 9 Sep 40. He, Sgts. Hutt and Pollard seem to have formed a 'regular' crew in September. However, they, like most crews, rarely flew in the same aircraft mainly because there were more crews than aircraft.²⁶ This meant that Uncle Jack would have had

¹⁷ "Blenheim Over The Balkans", pages 25 and 29 – Chapter IV First Impressions

¹⁸ "Wings Over Olympus", page 17 – Chapter 1 – Looking for the War in the East

¹⁹ "Gerald's War", page 194 – Chapter 14 Meet The Bish

²⁰ "Blenheim Over The Balkans", pages 32 and 33 – Chapter IV - First Impressions

²¹ "Wings Over Olympus", pages 38 and 39 – Chapter 4 – We are Bombed

²² "Wings Over Olympus", page 31 – Chapter 3 – We Bomb

²³ "Blenheim Over The Balkans", page 31 – Chapter IV - First Impressions

²⁴ "Gerald's War", pages 198-200 - Chapter 14 - Meet The Bish

²⁵ "Wings Over Olympus", pages 36 and 37 – Chapter Two - We Bomb

²⁶ "Blenheim Over The Balkans", BOTB, pages 49 and 62 – Chapters VIII and IX – Abort Durazzo

to carry his Vickers VGO machine gun from aircraft to aircraft since the gunners had their own weapon. The 7 sorties he flew from El Daba, are:

Date and # on the raid	Aircraft	Crew	Destination and distance 1 way	Time	Remarks
9 Sep 40 <i>8 aircraft on raid.</i>	Blenheim I L1481	Sgt Hutt Sgt Pollard Sgt Munro	Bomb Tobruk foreshore town. Bomb wharf and jetties.	1315-1645	Uncle Jack's aircraft failed to reach objective, turned back at Sidi Barrani having lost formation due to engine trouble.
14 Sep 40 <i>8 aircraft on raid.</i>	Blenheim I L4825	Sgt Hutt Sgt Pollard Sgt Munro	Enemy MT 5 miles South-West of Sollum	1410-1710	Bombs landed among tents.
17 Sep 40 <i>8 aircraft on raid.</i>	Blenheim I L6660	Sgt Hutt Sgt Pollard Sgt Munro	Concentration of MT SW of Sidi Barrani village	1835-2040	Incendiaries overshot target.
23 Sep 40 <i>9 aircraft on raid.</i>	Blenheim I L6658	Sgt Hutt Sgt Pollard Sgt Munro	Bomb Tobruk town and jetties	1245-1635	ME [sic: HE?] bombs exploded right across town from WE [sic: West to East? NE?] falling on outskirts to the East.
17 Oct 40 <i>3 aircraft on raid.</i>	Blenheim I L1540	P/O Buchanan Sgt Stack Sgt Munro	Bomb camp at Bir Sofafi	1656-1900	Bombs fell across target area.
25 Oct 40 <i>9 aircraft on raid.</i>	Blenheim I L4...	(Sgt Hutt) (Sgt Pollard) (Sgt Munro)	Sidi Barrani Enemy camp	0605-1005	Bombs not released.
5 Nov 40 [Qotafiyah] <i>9 aircraft on raid.</i>	Blenheim I L6658	F/O Ritchie Sgt Pollard Sgt Munro	Encampment ESE of fort Madalena	0830-1120	Bombs burst to right of camp on outskirts.

NOTES.

1. 17 Sep 40 - second raid that day on the same target.
 - Four crews who had been on the afternoon raid went out with the four fresh crews.

- Blenheim I, L6660 - Undershot night landing hitting the COs car and damaged beyond repair. Sgts Hutt, Pollard and Munro were unhurt – see [photo](#). (Tommy Wisdom mentions the incident but not the names of the crew.²⁷)
2. 25 Oct 40 - the F541 for this date was damaged making it impossible to decipher the last 3 digits for L4... However, L4825 and L4926 seem to be the only two aircraft in that serial batch on the roster at that time. Since L4825 was also on this operation, Uncle Jack was probably in L4926.
 3. Why is there a three-and-a-half-week gap between Uncle Jack's fourth and fifth raids? The weather and training were less likely to be factors but, once again, Don Clark provided some possible answers. Uncle Jack may have had some regular leave, or he could have been on sick leave with some middle eastern ailment. Aircraft availability/serviceability could be another factor – it would have been harder to maintain the Blenheims at a forward field.
 4. Sgt. Hutt is not mentioned in the Fs541 after 25 Oct 40, and may have been posted. Uncle Jack and Pollard flew with F/O Ritchie on 5 Nov 40 and Uncle Jack became part of a 'regular' crew with F/O Jerdein and Sgt Taylor in Greece

2. The Move to Greece

Background. On 28 Oct 40 Mussolini ordered the invasion of Greece using Albania, which the Italians had invaded in April 1939, as a platform for the assault. Since an attack on Greece presented a threat to the defence of the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East, Britain decided it had to help the Greeks. Based on intelligence that an [invasion was imminent](#), RAF HQME were ordered to quickly deploy aircraft to support the poorly equipped Greeks. This was something they could ill afford to do - not only did they have too few aircraft for their existing task, but the ones they had were slower and not as well armed as the Italians'. In addition, the British Army was about to launch an offensive that would require the support of every aircraft at the HQME's disposal. Despite that a small force, designed to be capable of rapid expansion, was sent to Greece at once. Eight weeks after his first op on 211 Sqn. Uncle Jack became part of that small force.

On 6 Nov 40, the day that Headquarters British Air Forces Greece (BAFG) was established in Athens, 211 Sqn. received orders to strike camp immediately. Once again it's impossible to tell how Uncle Jack moved from one country to another. Did he fly in one of the Blenheims or was he part of the Ground Party? The repositioning flights weren't operations and so aren't recorded in the Fs541. We do know that the crews and aircraft in the Air Party arrived in Greece on 23 Nov 40²⁸ and carried out a raid on Durazzo the following day²⁹. We also know, from [the F541](#), that Uncle Jack did not take part in that raid. However, he could have flown from Egypt to Greece and the aircraft was not included in the raid because it was either unserviceable, or undergoing routine maintenance, or just not required.

Assuming Uncle Jack travelled with the Ground Party these edited extracts from [F540](#) give an idea of what it would have been like for him.

- [6/11/40](#) – *"On the order to pack the entire Sqn. set to with a will, being glad to be relieved of the Desert at last" completing it with "the utmost speed and efficiency".*
- [7/11/40](#) – *"The whole Sqn. was...on the road...after spending the night at Amriya...arrived at RAF Ismailia whilst an air raid was in progress."*

²⁷ "Wings Over Olympus", page 45 – Chapter Four – We are Bombed

²⁸ "Wings Over Olympus", pages 77 and 79 – Chapter Nine - Reinforcements

²⁹ "Blenheim Over The Balkans", pages 37 and 38 – Chapter V – Arrival from the Desert

- 9-14 Nov 40 – The Sqn., re-equipped and adjusted the personnel strength. *"The MT and all Sqn. equipment left Ismailia on the 11th and proceeded independently to..... Alexandria, ready for embarking".*
- 14 Nov 40 – *"The Sqn. personnel left Ismailia at 0300 hours by rail", reached Alexandria uneventfully and "spent the night in an Army reception camp a short distance from Sidi Baber".*
- 15 Nov 40 – *"The Sqn. personnel were embarked on the HMS Gloucester", accompanied by the Orion, Ajax, Sydney and Berwick. The uneventful journey [530 nautical miles] took 24 hours. "The weather was beautiful and the cruisers made a very impressive picture as they steamed at 28 knots."*
- 16 Nov 40 – *"The Sqn. disembarked at Piraeus...where they met with a terrific reception the whole way from the docks to the camp at [Tatoi-Menidi](#). The population made the men heartily welcome, and it was very pleasant for all ranks".*³⁰ (Tommy Wisdom confirms this saying "At every corner Greek soldiers and civilians greeted our airmen, shaking hands and offering hospitality.")
- 17-22 Nov 40 - This period was spent getting various things fixed as well as possible *"in view of the lack of facility, especially...the Cookhouse, which Section performed heroic work under the most trying conditions".*
- 22-25 Nov 40 *"The Air Party arrived, and the Sqn. took the task of getting ready for instant operations very seriously and within a few days everything was "Operationally Serviceable".*

Unanswered Question.

- I wonder if Uncle Jack sent the Christmas card with "Greetings from Egypt" to Nellie, his older sister, before he left Egypt or after arriving in Greece?

3. Greece

Background. BAFG and the Greek High Command decided that the small number of RAF aircraft available would be best used to bomb enemy supply bases³¹ e.g., the 2 Albanian ports being used to bring in men and supplies – Valona (now called Vlore) and Durazzo (now called Durrës). However, Greece was not at war with Germany and, to avoid provoking the Germans, the Greeks would not allow the RAF to use their northern airfields.

That directly affected Uncle Jack and 211 Sqn. in several ways. It put the Albanian ports at the limits of the Blenheim's fuel capacity and meant the crews had to fly through the Greek mountains while heavily loaded, limiting their ability to climb and exposing them to the risk of icing up. It also deprived the crews of all but a few beaches/fields suitable for emergency landings. At the time airline pilots said that the unpredictable Greek weather, combined with the mountains, made flying conditions in Greece the worst in Europe³². While the pilots used cloud cover to full advantage, one of the ironies was that they'd often fight their way up through dreadful weather and come out into a clear, cloudless sky over Valona.³³ Before the winter was out many of the RAF pilots told Tommy Wisdom they didn't mind Italian fighters over a target but the return trip, dodging cloud covered mountains, fighting snow and ice "was no fun at all".³⁴ In addition, the short winter days, with few hours of daylight, meant the raids always arrived over Valona at about the same time - so Italian fighters were often up and waiting for them. Finally, the Nazi Legation in Athens, assisted by German 'tourists'

³⁰ "Wings Over Olympus", page 62 – Chapter Seven – B.A.F.G. Comes to Greece

³¹ "Wings Over Olympus", page 64 - Chapter Seven – B.A.F.G. Comes to Greece

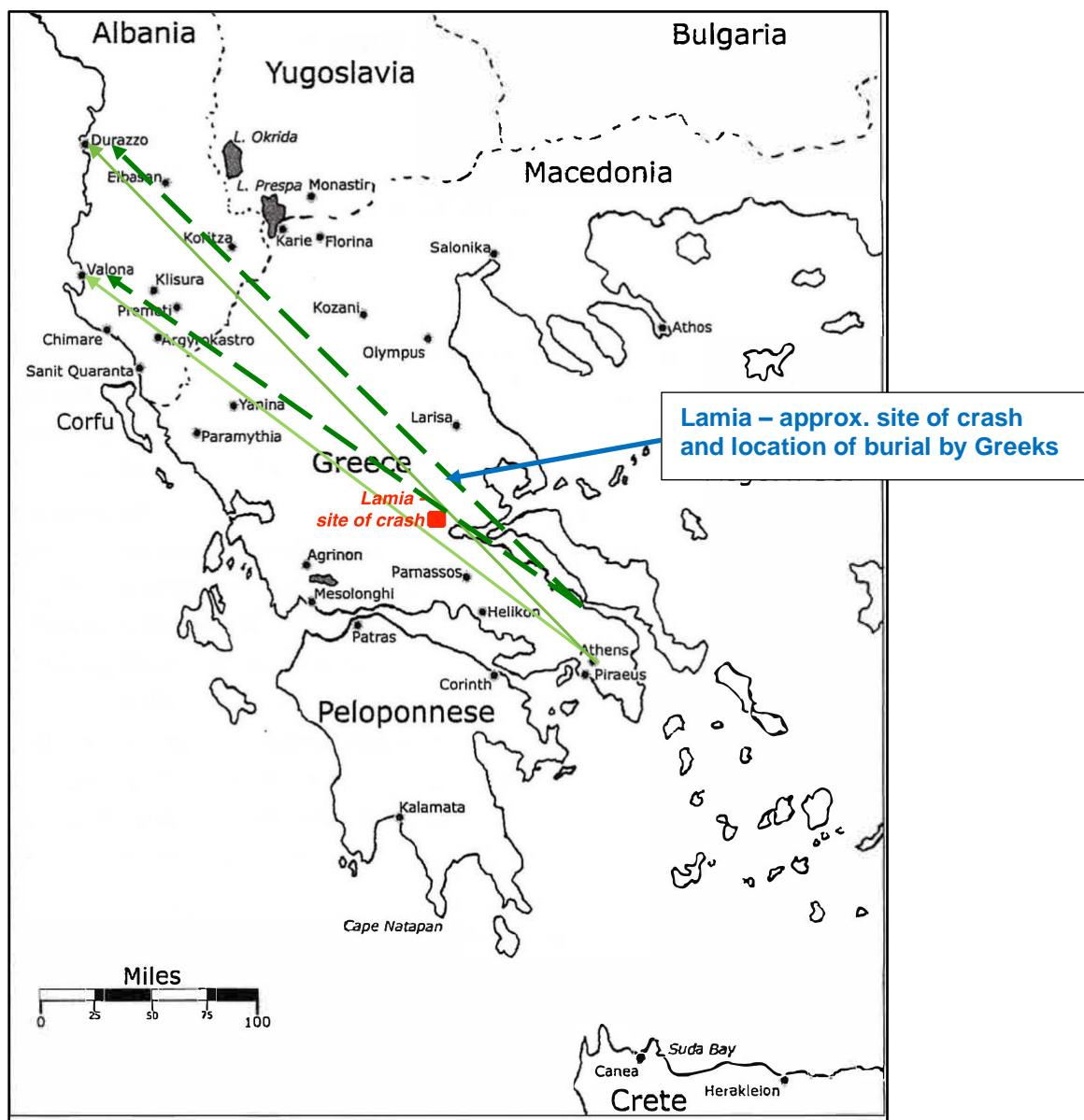
³² "Wings Over Olympus", page 78 – Chapter Nine - Reinforcements

³³ "Wings Over Olympus", page 93 - Chapter Twelve – "Same Time, Same Place

³⁴ "Wings Over Olympus", page 79 - Chapter Nine - Reinforcements

in the city, passed information to the Italians continuously resulting e.g., in Italian fighters were waiting for another Sqn. when they carried out a daylight raid on Valona,³⁵

Map showing airfields in Greece, targets in Albania and where Uncle Jack was killed³⁶



NOTE

1. The green lines are drawn straight to 211 Sqn's. targets. However, the crews could not always fly a direct route. James Dunnet describes a raid that went west from Athens to Mesolonghi, up the coast and the west coast of Corfu to Valona³⁷.
2. Shortly after Uncle Jack's death, in Feb 41, the Sqn. moved to Paramythia in the northwest of Greece, much closer to the Albanian border.

³⁵ "Wings Over Olympus", page 65 – Chapter Seven – B.A.F.G. Comes to Greece

³⁶ "Blenheim Over The Balkans", page 102 – Chapter XIV - Action

³⁷ "Blenheim Over The Balkans", page 82 – Chapter XI – The Fall of Argyrokastr

Uncle Jack in Greece. There were, however, advantages to being in Greece. Uncle Jack probably welcomed the green and brown earth and sweeping forested mountains and valleys which replaced the hot, dry, burning dust and flies of the flat, featureless desert. James Dunnet, who had been in Egypt for less time than Uncle Jack, was delighted by the clean, refreshing air – and the smell of fresh green grass³⁸. The weather, on the ground, was probably a pleasant change with average daily temperatures of 14°C dropping to an overnight low of 9°C and November and December two of the wettest months of the year.

When Uncle Jack first arrived at Menidi things would still have been pretty disorganized. Everyone slept on iron beds with straw mattresses (or camp beds and sleeping bags if they'd brought them) in the same cold, draughty hangar. There was only cold water to wash in and the food was basic – bacon, bully beef stew and mashed potatoes – and sometimes cold. However, separate Messes for the Officers, Sergeants (Uncle Jack would have shared a room with a couple of other Sergeants) and other ranks were organized within days and operational life on the Sqn. began to take shape.



Uncle Jack was only in Greece for either 2 or 3 weeks before he was killed (depending on if he was in the Air or Ground Parties). Hopefully, though, he and his friends were able to get into Athens a few times in their off-duty hours. The Greeks were very pleased to see the British airmen and made them very welcome (one reason the Sqn. medics held regular 'Free from Infection' inspections). In the bars, restaurants and clubs the food and drinks were relatively inexpensive (he would have known to be careful what he said around the German 'tourists' who hung around).³⁹

*Picture - Menidi - The crew of a Blenheim I study their maps before taking off on a raid on an Italian port in Albania.*⁴⁰

He probably had time to explore the city, comparing the modern shops around Omonoia Square, offering attractive Christmas presents, with the smaller, more traditional shops in the narrow streets nearer the foot of the Acropolis⁴¹. I wonder if he visited the Parthenon and Acropolis and added them to the Pyramids, things that probably no other 'Lossie loon' had seen.

When Uncle Jack was flying it would have been much colder than in Egypt. He would have started wearing his blue, wool uniform (with collar and tie) and standard issue, calf-length, fleece-lined, suede flying boots again. He would also have pulled out either his Irvin Jacket or Sidcot Suit⁴² - provided he had been lucky enough to get one. If he was one of the

³⁸ "Blenheim Over The Balkans", pages 34-36 – Chapter V – Arrival from the Desert

³⁹ "Blenheim Over The Balkans", pages 39-48 – Chapter VII – Arrival in Greece

⁴⁰ By Hensser H (Mr), Royal Air Force official photographer. This is photograph CM 280 from the collections of the Imperial War Museums., Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=24464334>

⁴¹ "Blenheim Over The Balkans", pages 52-56 – Chapter VIII – Solo in Athens

⁴² "Blenheim Over The Balkans", page 52 – Chapter VIII – Solo in Athens

unlucky ones he may have done what others did – pull his flying gear on over his pyjamas⁴³.

Uncle Jack's operations in Greece. Uncle Jack flew only 4 sorties from Menidi before being killed. Extracts from the [F541](#) are in the table below:

Date and # on the raid	Aircraft	Crew	Destination and distance 1 way	Time	Remarks
27 Nov 40 <i>6 aircraft on raid.</i>	Blenheim I L4926	F/O Jerdein Sgt Taylor Sgt Munro	Raid on Durazzo <i>320 miles NW of Menidi</i>	0730-1330	Enemy cruiser bombed, missed by 200 yards.
1 Dec 40 <i>9 aircraft on raid.</i>	Blenheim I L4926	P/O Jerdein Sgt Taylor Sgt Munro	Bombing raid on Valona <i>285 miles NW of Athens</i>	1025-1250	No bombs dropped due to bad weather. 10/10 cloud, raining and freezing conditions experienced. All aircraft returned to base.
4 Dec 40 <i>9 aircraft on raid.</i>	Blenheim I L4926	P/O Jerdein Sgt Taylor Sgt Munro	Raid on Tepelene <i>250 miles NW of Menidi</i>	1400-1715	Town hit with bomb salvoes across the Northern side.
7 Dec 40 <i>8 aircraft on raid.</i>	Blenheim I L1535	P/O Jerdein Sgt Barbour Sgt Munro	Bomb shipping in Valona harbour	1300-1700	Aircraft crashed near Lama. Bodies of crew found near aircraft.

NOTES.

1. The summer palace of the Greek Royal Family was located at Tatoï on the lower slopes of Mt Parnes. [Menidi](#), the pre-war civil airport and Hellenic Air Force station, located some 4 miles (8km) to the South of the palace by road, was originally called Athens (Tatoï), and the adjacent railway station was named Tatoï. The railway station at Menidi village was a couple of miles closer to Athens. In World War 2, the proximity of the Royal palace caused the RAF to adopt [Menidi](#) as the name of the airfield on 28 Nov 40 according to the [F540](#) (although they often used "Menidi (Tatoï)").
2. 27 Nov 40 – This raid on Durazzo is described in James Dunnet's book⁴⁴ and is a good example of the impact of the Greek refusal to let the RAF use their northern airfields.

⁴³ "Blenheim Over The Balkans, page 161 – Chapter XXII – 'Kiwi' Pilot

⁴⁴ "Wings Over Olympus", pages 59-69 – Chapter IX – Abort Durazzo

The aircraft, each carrying four 250lb. bombs, had to land and refuel on the way out. They landed at Araxos on the northwest tip of the Peloponnese, about 30km east of Patras. The refuelling had to be done by hand, by Uncle Jack and the other crews. The petrol and oil were delivered in cans, which were opened using the aircraft's axe. The heavy cans were manhandled up on the wings and poured into the tanks. The oil had to be poured through a strainer and an improvised one was passed between the crews.

3. 1 Dec 40 – Note the comments about the cloud, rain and freezing conditions.

4. Uncle Jack's Final Sortie.

The raid on Saturday, 7 Dec 40 at 13:00 was the second on Valona that day. Nine aircraft had gone out at 07:10, bombed Valona and returned safely at 10:55. Eight of those aircraft were used again on the afternoon raid.

Three crews who had been on the morning raid went out again in the afternoon. Sqn.Ldr Gordon-Finlayson experienced severe icing conditions and returned to base due to the adverse weather conditions; F/O Campbell returned to base due to the failure of his oxygen system; F/L Jones completed the raid, encountered fighters over target and returned safely.

Two of the five fresh crews, P/O Herbert and P/O Cox, returned with Gordon-Finlayson; one, P/O Thompson, completed the raid, was attacked by two fighters, took cover in the clouds and returned safely; and two crashed. Uncle Jack and the 5 other airmen were the first fatalities suffered by 211 Sqn. in Greece.

The entry in 211 Sqn.'s [F540](#) for 7 Dec 40 reads:

"7/12/40 Nine aircraft armed with 250lb bombs took off at 07:10 hours to bomb shipping at Valona. One fairly large vessel received a direct hit and bombs burst near others. Appendix 'D'.

The operation was repeated, aircraft taking off at 1300 hours. This time the aircraft met extremely rough weather with low cloud over the hills and severe icing conditions. Only two of our aircraft reached their objectives and these were intercepted by enemy fighters which prevented observation of results. Five aircraft returned without having reached their target, the remaining two crashing into hills (near Lama [sic Lamia] less than 100 miles North of Menidi) on the outward journey. Appendix 'E'.

The crews of both (names below) aircraft were killed:

Blenheim L4926

Pilot P/O PL Pickersgill (41957); Observer 745958 Sgt Taylor, H; Gunner 650433 Sgt Hallett HA.

Blenheim L1535

P/O GI Jerdein (42312); Observer 746793 Sgt Barber, JE; Gunner 638862 Sgt Munro J."

Sgt. James Dunnet was also on the afternoon raid, in one of the two aircraft which returned to base with the Squadron Commander. His book includes the following extract from Appendix E to the F540, the narrative report, which was submitted at the time: "As soon as aircraft entered cloud, frost accumulated on the leading edges (of the wings), wireless mast and airscrew. Large chunks were thrown against the cabin by the propellers. The temperature was minus 20°. The aircraft shuddered heavily."⁴⁵

⁴⁵ "Blenheim Over The Balkans" by James Dunnett, Chapter XVII - Commander's Report, Page 134

Sqn.Ldr. Tommy Wisdom said that both crews "crashed while returning from a raid in filthy weather. Ice was in the clouds, and the clouds came below the mountain peaks. They hadn't a chance."⁴⁶

Note that Tommy Wisdom says the crash occurred "while returning". The [F540](#) on the other hand says that the crash occurred "on the outward journey". The Narrative Report, Appendix E to the F540,⁴⁷ for this raid was written by Sqn.Ldr. Gordon-Finlayson (who would also have approved the entry in the F540). The copy Don Clark sent to me is, in his words, a poor copy which cannot be readily improved but it contains some interesting points. Here are the relevant sections - I've used (?) to indicate words that are not clear.

"Since the Squadron had already carried out a raid on VALONA during the morning, and had found the weather to be clear over and EAST(?) of CORFU and since the weather was clear over the ATHENS(?) area, it was decided to approach VALONA over the hills. The height of the cloud on our course was 22,000 feet. At this height one flight of two aircraft was seen to be lagging behind slightly and the leader throttled back. The flight continued to drift away and, instead of following the leader round some cloud at 25,000 (the first digit is illegible) feet, was last seen flying through it."

It's clear from the rest of the report that this happened on the outward leg. The quote above which Dunnet used in his book describes the weather shortly before the decision was made to turn back.

Assuming this was the case, it raises a number of questions. At what point on the journey were the 2 aircraft last seen? Did they crash immediately on entering the cloud? If so, would the other crews have seen any explosions/fire through the clouds? Or did they turn back immediately they were separated from the rest of the Sqn.? Did the aircraft crash because they became uncontrollable due to the build-up of ice? Or did they crash trying to descend below the clouds? Would the bombs on L1535 have exploded and destroyed the bodies? (The Greeks claimed to have found bodies or, at the very least, three sets of identity tags.)

The entry in the Sqn. [F540](#) the following day:

"MENIDI 8/12/40

The crew of Blenheim L4926 was buried at Agrinion by the Greek Orthodox Church. The second crew were buried at Lama (sic Lamia) by the same church."

The [F540](#) and [F541](#) both show the site of the crash and the original burial as Lama not Lamia - an error/typo by the Sqn. Adjutant's Office. Did the 2 aircraft become separated ([Agrinion](#), now Agrinio, is some distance from [Lamia](#))?

8 – Aftermath⁴⁸

At 00:15 hours on Monday, 9 Dec 40 the Air Ministry received a Signal from HQME informing them that L1535 had crashed on 7 Dec 40, time unknown. At 10:00am the same day the Air Ministry sent Telegrams to the Next of Kin (NOK) – "Deeply regret to inform you that your son, Sergeant John Munro, is reported to have lost his life as a result of air

⁴⁶ "Wings Over Olympus", page 92 – Chapter Eleven – "Pension" Wisdom.

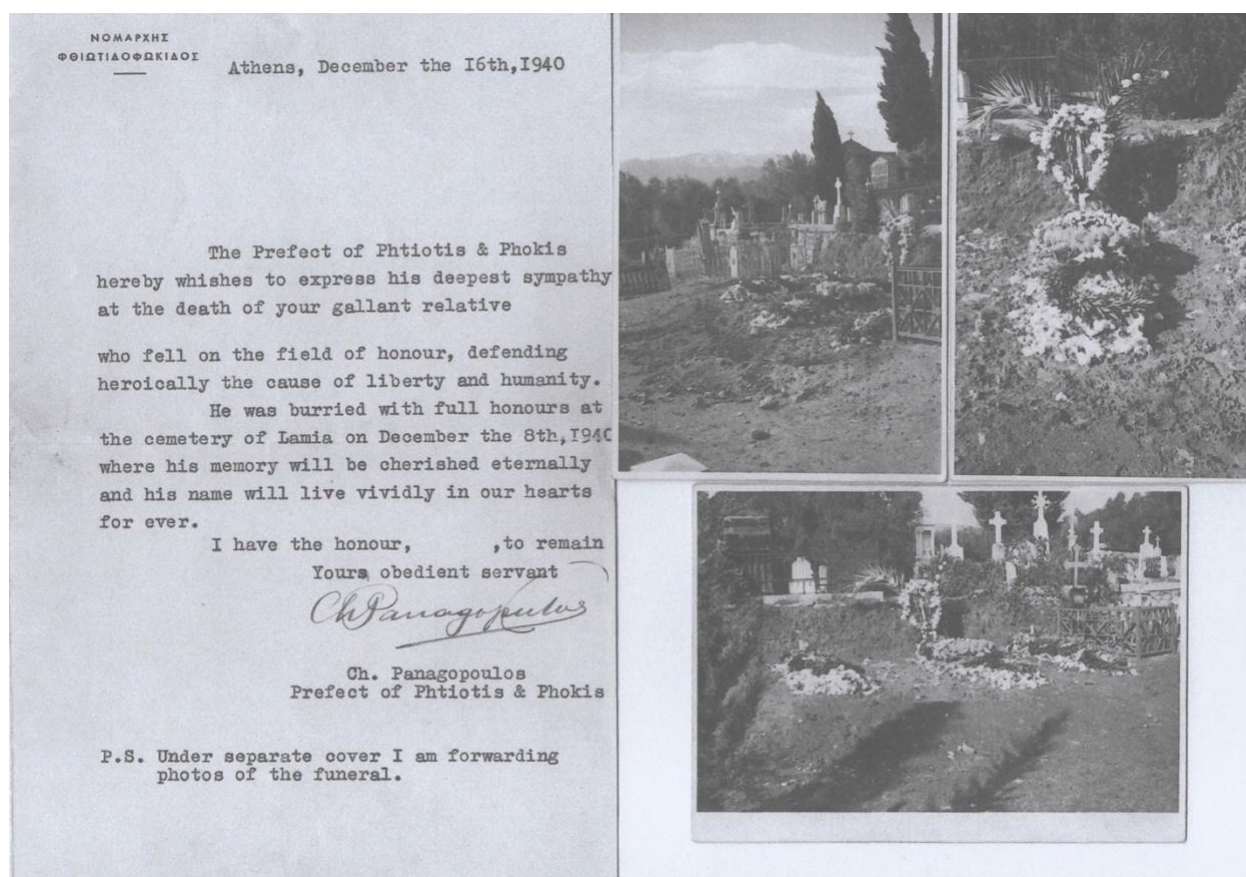
⁴⁷ AIR 27/1304

⁴⁸ AIR 81/4496 P4 Casualty file for Blenheim L1535 of Jerdein, Barber and Munro.

operations on 7 Dec 40. The Air Council express their profound sympathy." A letter confirming the telegram was placed in the post the same day.

Having known Granny and Granda Munro we can imagine how they reacted to this news. For it to have arrived just over 2 weeks before Christmas would have made a bad situation worse. Bobby (11 years old) and Jean (13 years old) would have been at home. Lewis was 18 and already in the Navy; Findlay at 23 was (probably) in the Army; and Nellie (25 years old) was in St. Monance with her husband.

A week later, on Monday, 16 Dec 40, the Prefect of [Phtiotis & Phokis](#)⁴⁹ wrote to the relatives of Uncle Jack's crew expressing his deepest sympathy and explaining that the crew members were buried with full military honours. He attached photographs of the graves and promised to send photos of the funeral⁵⁰.



Then, at the end of January 1941, the RAF Chaplain wrote to Granda. Although the mountain roads had prevented him arriving in time to attend the funeral he had visited the graves and spoken to the Prefect, Mayor and Chief of Police. He spoke highly of the care and respect the local people had shown Uncle Jack and his 2 crew mates. They had even renamed a road in the town to perpetuate their memory. (A brief search of [current street names](#) in Lamia does not show anything connected to the Blenheim crew. However, 83 years have passed since the letter was written, Lamia is a much larger town than it was

⁴⁹ In 1940 Greece consisted of 10 geographical Departments/Administrative Regions, each of which was divided into [Prefectures](#).

⁵⁰ Photo from Uncle Lewis' papers.

than it was then and so the street may have been renamed.)

In Headquarters.
Mitalo East.
Force V.
30.1.41.

Dear Mr. Munro.

Long delayed though the writing of this letter is it nevertheless brings my deep sympathy with you on the loss of your son, and I extend it and my sympathy to all who loved him.

I regret that I did not know him, and that I was unable to conduct his funeral service: he was buried by the Greek Orthodox Church at Lamia, a small town some 100 miles north of Athens which was too far away on these mountain roads to permit me to get there in time for the funeral. But I was able to visit his grave a close of the other two who died with him, Pilot Officer Gordon & Sgt. Barker. I hope that the town

2

of Lamia had honoured him and the others not every possible care & every mark of respect & gratitude: the whole of the little town seemed to have attended the service.

I was touched at the immense pains the authorities had come to, in order to show their gratitude to Britain & particularly to you son & the others for their having made the supreme sacrifice.

The Prefect, the Bishop, the Chief of Police, & the Mayor all felt they were doing a small thing in return for the sacrifice of life & self which you son had made for the Allied cause. To perpetuate their memory one of the more important streets in Lamia has been renamed after them.

I am sending by surface mail a set of photographs of the funeral and the grave and these will give you some idea of what I mean: the

3.

larger photos are presented to you by the Prefect of Lamia.

Their graves are in the cemetery of the town & will receive every care & attention, until after the war their bodies are removed to the British War Graves Cemetery in Athens where they will be permanently cared for.

May I again express my sympathy & say that if I can be of any service whatever to you do not hesitate to write to me.

Yours sincerely
Leslie Wright.
Chaplain R.A.F.

The Chaplain⁵¹ said that he was sending photos of the funeral and graves by surface mail and that the 'larger' photos were presents from the Prefect and that may be how the Prefect's letter and photos on Page 22, above, came to be in Granny and Granda's possession. The photos of the funeral appear, however, to be missing.

⁵¹ Letter from Uncle Lewis' papers.

Then four and a half years later, on 10 Jul 45, the Air Ministry received a letter from the Chief Reporter of the Hertfordshire Mercury. He enclosed a letter from a Lieutenant Harold Sacks UDF, who was seconded to the 6th Battalion of the Black Watch and editor of a newspaper for the Central Mediterranean Forces. Sacks said that in mid-May 45 he'd met a Greek family in Lamia who had information about 3 British airmen who had been killed while 'returning' from a raid in November 1940. Their



plane had caught fire over the mountains forming the [Thermopylae Pass](#) and crashed. The family told Sacks that, since there had been no British presence in the area, the Greek Commandant had ordered out cars to recover the bodies and bring them to Lamia.

The airmen were given a funeral, for which the whole town turned out, "solemnised in the best Greek tradition." The family produced a photograph⁵² of the 3 coffins inside the Greek Church in Lamia in which the funeral was held.

The men were then buried in a picturesque cemetery outside Lamia overlooking the rolling Thermopylae Plain and the sea. The family produced a second photograph which, unfortunately, only shows the grave of Sgt. Barber but the graves for Uncle Jack and P/O Jerdein were to the left, looking at the photo.

The Greeks erected crosses over the graves and attached Greek religious lanterns, called Cardilles, to them. Every evening some of the local women and girls hiked to the cemetery and lit long, thin candles which they placed in the lanterns. Sacks described this as a highly religious ceremony and a tremendous tribute to the airmen. This continued until 1942 when



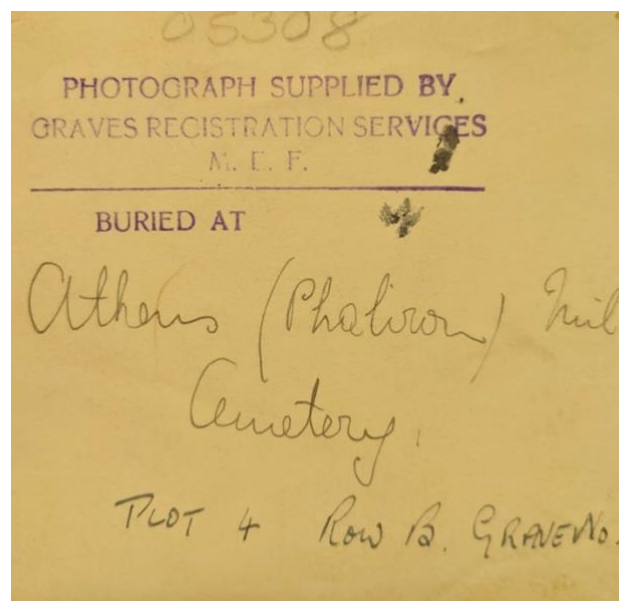
the Germans became aware of the significance of the visits and put a stop to them, removed the crosses and lanterns and threatened the townspeople with reprisals if they persisted with the practice. So, Sacks was told, the visits continued in secret.

Lieutenant Sacks suggested that the photographs might be of some comfort to the NOK. On 25 Jul 45 the Air Ministry wrote to Granda Jock enclosing the photograph of the 3 coffins taken in the Church. I remember seeing it at 64 Dunbar Street.

⁵² Both photos taken from the RAF Casualty file for Blenheim L1535.

Uncle Jack had a girlfriend. She was someone he met after joining the RAF and it was serious because I remember being told that her parents met with Granny and Granda Munro sometime after Uncle Jack's death and it was agreed she'd move on with her life.

The crew's bodies were recovered by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) in February 1945 and reinterred in Plot 4, row B, lot 12, Phaleron War Cemetery in Athens. On 31 Jan 46 the Air Ministry wrote to inform Granda Jock and enclosed photographs⁵³ of Uncle Jack's grave.



9 – Final Thoughts

The weather.

In [the 16 days](#) between 211 Sqn. beginning operations in Greece and Uncle Jack's death, 4 of 7 raids were aborted for weather related reasons and there were 3 "no flying" days due to bad weather – including the 2 days before Uncle Jack was killed. The pilots had flown in freezing conditions only once before encountering them on 7 Dec 40.

Commenting on weather conditions in December 1940, Sqn.Ldr. Wisdom wrote, "*The weather...was rendering flying, which had always been difficult, exceedingly dangerous; low clouds shrouded the mountain peaks, and ice formed on wings and jammed the controls...*"⁵⁴

⁵³ Photos from Robert Marr

⁵⁴ "Wings Over Olympus", page 95 - Chapter Twelve – "Same Time, Same Place"

Wisdom also reported a talk, given in the same month, by the Air Officer Commanding (AOC) BAFG to the War Correspondents in which the AOC said *"Flying conditions in Greece are more difficult than anywhere in Europe. The weather changes with great rapidity, making accurate forecasts impossible...Ice formations are another difficulty – instruments freeze, and air screws get a covering of ice which makes it difficult to maintain sufficient altitude to clear the mountains..."*⁵⁵

The other 2 members of Blenheim L1535's crew.

Pilot Officer (P/O) G. I. Jerdein, Pilot, first flew with 221 Sqn. on 27 Sep 40 and his final operation was his ninth. Tommy Wisdom described him as a "good fellow, keen as mustard on his job"⁵⁶. He was 22 years old. His grave is next to Uncle Jack's in Phaleron.

Sergeant Barber, Observer/Navigator/bomb aimer, flew his first operation on 211 Sqn. on 14 Sep 40. He was also on his ninth raid although he was flying with Uncle Jack for the first time. He was 21 years old. His grave is one row in front of Uncle Jack's.

What happened to 3 others who had flown with Uncle Jack?

Sgt. V. "Vic" Pollard with whom Uncle Jack flew once in Lossiemouth and 6 times in Egypt was killed on 6 Jan 41 while on a raid to Valona.

Sgt H. Taylor was in Uncle Jack's crew on 3 operations in Greece,. He was killed on his seventh operation with the crew of L4926 on 7 Dec 40, the same day as Uncle Jack.

Sgt. Hutt, who flew with Uncle Jack 5 times in Egypt and twice in Lossiemouth, is not mentioned in the Fs541 after 25 Oct 40 and may have been posted to another Sqn. Once again Don Clark has invested his own time trying to solve this mystery and has given me leads which I have yet to follow up.

The Books

James Dunnet and Gerald Davies were both on 211 Sqn., and Tommy Wisdom was detached to the Sqn., while Uncle Jack was there. Yet, apart from 2 mentions in "Gerald's War", Uncle Jack doesn't appear in their books. Why?

- Although James Dunnet was a Sergeant, and lived in the Senior NCO's Mess with Uncle Jack, it's clear from reading his book that he had a different background (e.g., he spoke French, was familiar with the Greek Classics, played the piano and was a regular at the cinemas and theatres in the West End). I know from experience that, even within the same rank, you socialize with the people with whom you have most in common.
- Gerald Davies' parents were similar to Uncle Jack's, and Gerald started RAF life in the ranks. However, he was a Pilot Officer by the time he arrived on 211 Sqn. so he lived in the Officers Mess and frequented the 'Officers Only' bars and restaurants in Athens.
- Tommy Wisdom had been a motoring journalist and had driven in the Monte Carlo Rally and the 24-hour at Le Mans before the war. He came from very different circumstances to Uncle Jack - like most officers e.g., the 211 Sqn. Commander's father was General Sir Robert Gordon-Finlayson and P/O Jerdein's parents lived in St. John's Wood, London, NW8. While officers and NCOs flew together as a crew, they did not socialize together.

⁵⁵ "Wings Over Olympus", page 97 - Chapter Twelve – "Same Time, Same Place

⁵⁶ "Wings Over Olympus", page 92 – Chapter Eleven – "Pension" Wisdom.

Uncle Jack is listed on the [211 Sqn. Honour Roll](#) and is mentioned on the web site in the narrative about undershooting the [night landing in L6660](#).

What happened to 211 Sqn. after Uncle Jack was killed?

211 Sqn. moved to Paramythia near the north-western border with Albania in [February 1941](#) and remained there until the fall of Greece in April 1941. It had some hard days – notably Easter Sunday, 13 Apr 41 when 6 aircraft and their crews failed to return from an operation. Tommy Wisdom, in one of his letters home, said that 211 Sqn. *"...came out of Greece with only one of the original pilots still with them."*⁵⁷

The Sqn. moved to Palestine in April 1941, was re-established at RAF Helwan (Cairo) in December 1941 and moved to the Far East in January 1942. Don Clark has recorded these events in detail on his excellent web site. James Dunnet also records much of what occurred in "Blenheim Over The Balkans".

10 - Final Words

Uncle Jack was 21 years, 5 months, and 8 days old when he died. He spent 1 year and 255 days in the RAF and flew on 13 operations before being killed.

In the introduction to his book Tommy Wisdom describes the members of 211 Sqn. as *"happy youths who quite simply and modestly slipped on the mantles of heroes: who now, many of them, lie forever...amid the mountains of Greece."*⁵⁸

James Gordon-Finlayson, the Officer Commanding 211 Sqn. wrote this:

*"Though they were few, too few, who fought in Greece,
They waged a constant fight;
A new mythology of glorious deeds
Their mountain tombstones write;
So tell their lasting honour to the world,
And keep their torch alight!"*⁵⁹

The inscription at the bottom of Uncle Jack's grave reads *"Years have passed, how long it seems, but in our hearts his face still beams"*.

It's up to us to make sure that's true.

⁵⁷ "Blenheim Over The Balkans", page 181 – Chapter XXIV – Letters Home

⁵⁸ 'Wings Over Olympus', page 13 – The Why and Wherefore of this Book

⁵⁹ 'Epitaph for a Squadron' was written in 1965 by Air Vice-Marshal J.R. Gordon-Finlayson RAF, Retd. who was Squadron Commander during the period that Uncle Jack served on 211 Sqn. Extracts of the poem including this, the final verse, can be found in "Blenheim Over The Balkans", pages 115-127.