MIKE VARLEY

Rowland Michael Gough Varley was born in Birmingham in 1922. At the age of 15, he left school and joined a firm of stockbrokers as a junior clerk. In July 1941 at the age of 18, he joined the RAF Volunteer Reserve. (His father had been an Observer in the RAF in the First World War). After three years of what he described as chaotic training, he was posted to 77 Squadron. In recent years when he talked of this period, he recalled ‘the comradeship of working towards a common goal with other people as a coordinated team’, and visiting and living in another country during training. He learned how to accept unpleasant things and make the best of them, and how to work with other people as a team, to achieve a common objective..

In the immediate post-war period he trained as a navigation instructor, came top of his class and joined the staff of the Empire Air Navigation School. He also met and married Joan. He eventually joined Airwork as a civilian navigation instructor in Scotland. He was considered the best in his field. The family moved to Airwork in Surrey. In 1955 he was approached to join the UN Aid Programme. The story goes that the interview took place in a pub where he was invited to rendezvous with a man carrying a briefcase. It all seemed very clandestine ... apparently the UN didn’t advertise jobs.

This resulted in Mike taking the family to Indonesia where he worked with ICAO, International Civil Aviation Organisation, under the UN Aid Programme. During the 1960s and ‘70s Mike worked for what was to become the Civil Aviation Authority, including a spell in Saudi Arabia and time with the Directorate of Operational Services Overseas, responsible for South East Asia and Pacific. He moved to the Directorate of Flight Safety in 1968. Here he was Secretary to the Bader Committee, working with Sir Douglas Bader investigating the operational consequence of aircrew fatigue, truly ground-breaking research which has improved air safety worldwide, and is still cited today.

In the 1970s Mike became CEO of the Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji, the body he set up to oversee and regulate civil aviation in the newly independent country.

Mike formally retired in 1982, but continued to work as a consultant for ICAO, undertaking contracts in Pakistan, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Thailand, Switzerland and Egypt.

By the late 1980s, he had wound down his consultancy work and entered retirement. But that didn’t stop him working. He had a lifelong interest in photography, adored early cinema, continued his obsession with books, researched family history, was elected a Life Fellow of the Royal Institute of Navigation (of which he was a founding member and member of the History of Air Navigation Group), embraced new technology, and had an eclectic taste in music.

He was passionate about 77 Squadron Association, and set up and managed our website, undertook research and answered enquiries. Like many who served in Bomber Command, he felt betrayed by the lack of recognition given to the decisive role they played in bringing WW2 to an end, and the fact that they suffered the highest casualty rate of any of the services. Although he attended the unveiling of the Bomber Command Memorial in 2012, he felt it was too late - most of those deserving recognition were no longer with us. In part, it was this sense of injustice that drove his commitment to the Association.