

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:04] DC: It takes the right skills and the right innovation to design and manage meaningful print marketing solutions. Welcome to Podcasts From the Printerverse, where we explore all facets of print and marketing that create stellar communications and sales opportunities for business success. I'm your host, Deborah Corn, the Intergalactic Ambassador to the Printerverse. Thanks for tuning in. Listen long and prosper.

[EPISODE]

[0:00:31] DC: Hey everybody, welcome to Podcasts From the Printerverse. This is Deborah Corn, your Intergalactic Ambassador. And today's guest is someone whose name will be familiar to many in the UK print and visual media space. Robert McClements is a long-time champion of the power of print known widely for his work organizing the BPIF's Visual Media Conference. But beyond the business of print, Robert brings history to life, quite literally. His latest project, *Operation Gisela: Echoes of a Sacrifice*, is a deeply personal international collaboration that not only showcases print emotional power but also its role in preserving legacy, memory, and truth.

Inspired by a photo of a stained-glass window in Canada honoring Flight Lieutenant Jack Laffoley who died in the Luftwaffe's final major raid over Britain in 1945 and to mark the 80th anniversary of his death, Robert set out on a journey that led to a replica of the window and a moving documentary that brings the events of *Operation Gisela* to life. From archive documents and family letters to modern wide-format print and lightbox displays, the story was told through and made possible by the medium of print. It's a reminder of how our industry doesn't just market and manufacture, it remembers and it matters.

Welcome, Robert. You've certainly been busy since you've been retired.

[0:02:16] RM: Hi Deborah, it's fantastic to catch up with you and share this amazing journey. Yes, I've been totally absorbed for the last four months.

[0:02:26] DC: Before we get into this amazing project, can you give everybody who might not be aware of your story career in print? Some background information.

[0:02:36] RM: I'd be happy to do that. Yeah, people know me for the Visual Media Conference, but some people also know that I used to have a proper job. I got into print in my early 20s by mistake because I worked with a sign company and the sign company needed to expand its work and I thought screen printing would be a good idea that complemented my advertising that I've been doing so far. It didn't work very well, and the managing director called me into the office and said, "The strategic plan you've got, Robert, is not working. So on Monday morning, you're going to be the managing director. Do something with it, or I'll shut it down." Well, I did something with it and I turned it into a point-of-sale business and we started doing permanent point-of-sale for court signs, battery stands, anything that we could think of. And that's where it grew from there. I've done everything from screen printing point of sale to fine litho printing, and I even ran the press department of the Barnsley Chronicle for two years. Beat that.

[0:03:34] DC: As I mentioned in the introduction, you had seen a photo of a stained glass window in Canada, and that actually started your journey. What was it about that window and the photo of it actually that made you feel that the Operation Gisela story needed to be told?

[0:03:53] RM: Well, it brought a story to life about this Canadian pilot who had been such a close friend of my father who cherished that friendship until he died. I hadn't known about the stained-glass window until my father's bombardier at the age of 101, put me in contact with the family who showed me the stained glass window. And it is awesome. I put an image of it into the links at the end of the show so people can have a look at that and a picture of Jack Laffoley, which the story is all about.

[0:04:28] DC: Can we just go back to – I didn't realize there was a connection with your father. Can you share a bit deeper into that?

[0:04:36] RM: Okay. Yeah, the story is about the Royal Air Force and the Royal Canadian Air Force because my father flew in Halifax bombers and completed 38 trips and was expecting to finish at the same time as his friend from Canada, whose plane was damaged and didn't finish in time. And then on the 33rd trip, this Operation Gisela happened and my father's friend was

killed. But that made such a big impression on him. It lasted all the way through his life. When I began to understand that there was this window and a possibility of a celebration on the 80th anniversary, that's what started me to begin the investigation. That's only when I began to understand why it was so important.

[0:05:21] DC: You brought people together across borders, across generations, and histories to bring Operation Gisela to life, which also makes this project a story of collaboration. Who are your partners and what do they contribute to the project?

[0:05:37] RM: Well, Deborah, you will not be surprised to hear that my dear friend, Jon Bailey, Chief Executive of Precision Proco and Dscoop legend, was instrumental in helping to recreate this image. Of course, John had been my co-conspirator for 10 years, organizing the BPIF's Visual Media Conference. You know, the conference that we transported you into, your transatlantic keynote was the highlight of the event.

[0:06:04] DC: Oh, thank you so much.

[0:06:05] RM: Anyway, I shared the photo with Jon over a breakfast meeting along with my father's flying logbook and the story of the friendship. And I sort have waited until Jon said, "I could print that." Now, I can't say it wasn't a bit premeditated. Because as I say in my early career, I ran a print company that specialized in illuminated signs. Anyway, once Jon had made the offer to print it, I went back to my friend at the sign company, Omega Signs, to say, "We need a lightbox." It was really a question of goodwill. And people really rallied around the idea of this commemoration. It was exceptional.

The technical side of it was a big challenge. I mean, the original image was not high-res. Jon's studio manager, a guy called Neil Newson, really had to work very hard. He merged two images, one from the image of the inscription at the bottom of the sign and the squadron badge. The next problem was how we're going to illuminate it. Neil took the original digital scanned image and stunned me. By hand, he created a mask of all of the black detail which was the lead in the original window. I mean it's amazing. It took ages and ages. And I put an image of that into the links at the end of the show because you will see that everything appears pink was black and it was the lead. Now that meant the lead area could be painted black, absolutely

opaque as the original, and the colors could be printed three times to perfect the illuminated image, which is exactly what happened. The technical spec, well, it was face printed on a 3-millimeter acrylic sheet, 030, which is the measure of translucency, using a Jetrix LXi7 LED-UV flatbed press, which I can only say is an amazing machine. It was emotional on so many different levels.

The project grew wings literally. Nearby is the Yorkshire Air Museum and Allied Forces Memorial. And once they'd seen what we could do, they agreed to hold a memorial service at which there were over 70 people. And that ranged from veterans in wheelchairs to an eight-year-old who saluted the window. There were Jack Laffoley's family from Canada, others from the States, France, and Germany. A whole range of people had been affected by this Operation Gisela.

And talking about the impact of print, when Jack's nephew switched on the lightbox, there was a spontaneous sound of awe and appreciation followed by absolute silence, and I thought, "Job done." It was a gift to all who had contributed. And in fact, we gave a printed miniature. Again, an image of that in the showcase links. A little version of the window which they took home. And the whole process began to develop the momentum of its own. Ahead of the service, I decided that I needed to do justice to Jon's enthusiasm and, well, why not make a documentary? So I did. And it took four months to do it.

So far, it's had over 800 views packed full of printed material. The material makes the story personal. Even Jack's diary, which is so poignant, his final entry. Through letters from the family, I managed to track down the daughter of one of the three survivors from the crash. She came to the service. She brought her father's logbook with the entry that night shot down in flames.

The RAF printed archives record showed the role of honor of the names of all of the casualties. Would you believe, through searching the internet, I came across a Brazilian airplane enthusiast who told me that he had the logbook from the Luftwaffe pilots that he'd had for 20 years and didn't know what to do with them. And I said, "Well, you can send me a copy and I'll put it into the documentary." So I did.

All of this, coupled with the archives of the museum, made it possible to provide, for the first time ever, a full and comprehensive story of Operation Gisela. And I'll tell you briefly what it was. At the end of the war, Germany was in a terrible state, there had virtually no fuel. And following some bombing attacks from the Canadian, British, and American forces, desperately, Hitler and Göring decided to allow them to come back, follow the bombers back, circling around the east coast of Britain, waiting for them to return until they relaxed. Went into the rest position, turned on the landing lights, all of the airstrip and the aerodrome lights were switched on, and the German Junkers 88 started shooting them down.

It was a terrible failure because the Germans lost as many planes as we did. Ninety people died in the British casualties and most of the German casualties because of bad weather, and they ran out of fuel on their way back. You can't believe it. Honestly, the whole thing has been just mind-blowing to begin to understand. And if you watch the video, which I hope you do using that link that I've sent, you will see where the whole thing ties together. And we were able to put that story together in the museum to have it dedicated and I think to give something a legacy, which spans all sides; British, German, Canadian, and French. That's what I set out to do.

The question of the impact of print sounds ridiculous. I hadn't realized just how much there was involved in it until I presented the story to my fellow liverymen of the worshipful company of stationers and newspaper makers. That's the ancient 600-year-old guild of the printing industry in the UK, but very modern and forward-thinking. And the past master said to me, "This is all about print, Robert. You need to just step back and do a tally of all the things that have contributed to it." So I did.

And I think that's why I'm so excited about being able to tell the story, personal, and emotional, but such a powerful demonstration of what can be achieved by gathering printed information in together. And you know, Deborah, I've always been a champion of print in its rightful place in the multimedia world. I cannot think of a better example of how I use the multimedia world. I interviewed people in Canada and Australia on Zoom. I got information from printed sources all over the world and we brought them together in the film, but it's populated by print.

[0:13:34] DC: It's incredible.

[BREAK]

[0:13:37] DC: Print Media Centr provides printspiration and resources to our vast network of global print and marketing professionals. Whether you are an industry supplier, print service provider, print customer or consultant, we have you covered, by providing resources and strategies that enable business marketing and creative success, reporting from global events, these podcasts, Project Peacock TV, and an array of community lifting initiatives. We also work with OEMs, suppliers, industry organizations, and event producers, helping you connect and engage with our vast audience, and achieve success with your sales, marketing, and conference endeavors. Visit Print Media Centr and connect with the Printerverse. Links in the show notes. Print long and prosper.

[EPISODE CONTINUED]

[0:14:32] DC: What did you learn about your father and his experience during the war through this project?

[0:14:41] RM: I learned quite a lot more by speaking to his bombardier, Albert Hodgkinson, who is now 103. He just had his 103rd birthday. He told me an amazing story about how they were coming back from Germany on a raid, and they had to fly into the clouds to avoid a German night fighter. And in the cloud, the plane began to gather ice on the wings, and the plane was falling out of the sky. And the pilot said, "Abandon. Get out. We're going to crash." But the escape hatch was frozen and they were pinned to the floor with the G-force of falling out of the sky. They couldn't get out.

The pilot and the copilot were standing on the dashboard pulling back on the stick. And apparently, those would know, in a Halifax bomber, there is a wire across the throttles which you should not exceed. They did. They pushed through the red line until everything started to shake and rattle and roll. And as they came out of the cloud into the warmer air, the ice began to fall off the wings.

Albert said to me, in his cockney accent, "Cor, blimey. We could see the bloody fish in the ice, from here." And they pulled the plane out of the dive and managed to get home. The plane was

wrecked. They bent the wings so badly it never flew again. Now, my father told me bits of these things, but never in that kind of detail. It was a real revelation.

My father did 38 tours. I now know, looking at it, by the end of the 38 trips, his chances of survival were 15%. You'll see in the film that I talk about this as being one spec against the entire Second World War. It's one pilot, two crews, and one squadron, but there were 55,000 British casualties, 26,000 American casualties, and 138,000 Luftwaffe casualties, all in bomber command during the Second World War. Emotional for me, but humbling, because there's another 55,000, 26,000, and 138,000 stories like this that should all be told.

[0:17:00] DC: My grandfather never spoke about the war to us. I know that he was in part of the Normandy thing. And he wasn't in the first wave. He was after that. But I mean, the most we ever got was that one time he was stuck in a crow's nest or something with another soldier and the Germans were on the floor of the forest and he was up in the trees. And they kind of made a camp there. They were stuck in that tree. They couldn't do anything for – I think it was two days. And that's the only story we've ever heard about the war. It was just so devastating to him. There's so many people of that generation that just don't talk about things like that. And we watch movies about it, sure, and we watch documentaries if you are into things like that. But this is such a personal connection for you to this historical event. Did you actually go to Canada to see the window?

[0:18:07] RM: No. No, I didn't. No, I haven't been able to do that. But I suppose, as the final twist in the story, in the printing process, Jon's team had been so keen to do a proof that I'll take the blame. I haven't made it clear, the 030 was a translucency measure. They printed it on an acetate sheet. And when Jon shared the proof to me, I looked at it and I thought, "It's killing up at the bottom. I don't think acrylic would do that." We had a spare copy.

And right at the end of the service, when we'd shown the film, and we had all these people from all over the world, and we gave out the little miniatures, I called Ross Oliver, this is Jack's nephew, back and I said, "Ross, we've forgotten something here." I said, "I know, seriously, they are concerned about the future of the window encounter because the church has been de-consecrated and there's a battle going on with the developers as to what's going to happen with it." I said, "Okay, there's one final thing for you, Ross." And I pulled out from a cardboard shoe

this acetate, three feet long and two feet wide, a perfect replica of the window. I said, "Here, you better take this back and put it on your wall." That's my story. That's why it's full of print.

And the final bit is if you go and look at the links at the end of the show, you will see that I also printed a ticket to see the film with a QR code. Please, look at the links, look at the QR code, watch the film. Eight Hundred views so far. Let's get it to a thousand.

[0:19:40] DC: Yeah, we'll get it to a thousand.

[0:19:45] DC: Like what you hear? Leave us a comment, click a few stars, share this episode, and please subscribe to the show. Are you interested in being the guest and sharing your information with our active and growing global audience? Podcasts are trending as a potent direct marketing and educational channel for brands and businesses who want to provide portable content for customers and consumers. Visit printmediacentr.com, click on podcasts, and request a partner package today. Share long and prosper.

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[0:20:20] DC: When people talk about the power of print, how do you hope that this project redefines or reinforces that idea?

[0:20:31] RM: I just think it provides a massive amount of evidence about how storytelling and impactful storytelling is achieved through images, through printed images, which are durable. They don't disappear into the internet. They are there as a permanent record, log books that were 80-years-old, a stained-glass window that's 75 years old. And then coming right up to date, the service in the chapel, we had an order of service. We had invitations. We had seating plans. We had the ticket with the QR code. It's all print. Take a story with so much power in it and just reflect on how much of that was enabled by the addition of printed material.

[0:21:20] DC: Is there a part two to this journey? Are you now going to be the printed historian, documentary guy? I mean, I know you, so I'm sure that you're plotting something.

[0:21:32] RM: Well –

[0:21:32] DC: Which is not retirement, maybe.

[0:21:35] RM: No, no. And actually, I don't want you to get the impression that ever done anything like this before, because I haven't. But the pleasure that I got from working with a young student who put the film together for me, and he's just applied for a bursary with the King's Trust Charity, and I happen to be a mentor for the King's Trust Charity, so we're hoping that we'll be able to carry on working together. And I'd love to do something more. I need to find the story. But in the meantime, we're going to put this in for the Tayside International Film Festival and see whether other people think it's any good.

[0:22:12] DC: That's amazing. Robert, thank you so much for reaching out and sharing this story with me so we could share it with everybody out there in the Printerverse. And as Robert's been mentioning, everything you need to connect to him, and see the images, and watch the documentary are in the show notes. Until next time, everybody, thank you for your time and attention. Print long and prosper.

[OUTRO]

[0:22:37] DC: Thanks for listening to Podcasts From the Printerverse. Please subscribe, click some stars, and leave us a review. Connect with us through printmediacentr.com, we'd love to hear your feedback on our shows and topics that are of interest for future broadcasts. Until next time, thanks for joining us. Print long and prosper.

[END]

Mentioned in This Episode:

Operation Gisela: Echoes of a Sacrifice Documentary:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s2KR3uj1gk4>

Operation Gisela Pictures: <https://podcastsfromtheprinterverse.com/operation-gisela-pictures/>

Robert McClements: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/robert-mcclements-87b3b92/>

Jon Bailey: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/jon-bailey-379a354/>

Precision Proco: <https://precisionproco.co.uk>

Omega Signs: <https://omega-signs.co.uk/>

Deborah Corn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/deborahcorn/>

Print Media Centr: <https://printmediacentr.com>

Partner with Print Media Centr: <https://printmediacentr.com/partnerships/>

Subscribe to News From The Printerverse: <https://printmediacentr.com/subscribe-2>

Project Peacock: <https://ProjectPeacock.TV>

Girls Who Print: <https://girlswhoprint.net>