9 Day/8 Night Itinerary

A Tour of the Airfields of the Eighth Air Force

"I'LL BE SEEING YOU"

East Anglia Air War Project

Keep the Home Hearth Burning: The Eighth Air Force, British Farm Families and the Air Front Against Germany during World War II[1]

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During World War II, the United States established air bases in East Anglia to support daylight bombing against the Axis powers in Europe. Throughout the region, small communities made way for the construction of large-scale airdromes. Farm land turned into a landscape of concrete, Nissan huts, and the implements of war as American bomber and fighter groups built significant infrastructure for operations against Nazi-held targets deep inside Europe. The sudden appearance of the Eighth Air Force in rural England, the rapid growth of the number of bases over a short time frame, and the resulting daily struggle for life and death over the skies of England and the continent forged a unique sense of community in these British villages and towns. The American air crews, the ground personnel, and their British hosts shared a unique relationship as the embattled British people and their distant American cousins "from over the pond" struggled to defeat the forces of fascism then threatening the free world.

In the early days after Pearl Harbor the United States faced the daunting task of establishing a massive network of operational bases for fighter and cargo squadrons, bomber groups, together with the logistical network necessary to sustain the daylight bombing offensive planned in concert with the British night operations over Europe. During the summer of 1942 U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull and Sir Charles Ingrave Courtenay Wood (2nd Earl of Halifax) held negotiations to establish Army Air Corps operations on English soil. Under the agreement signed on September 3, 1942, the British assumed responsibility "to supply all facilities necessary" for the U.S. Army Air Forces in England. Construction of so many bases across the rural countryside proved difficult due to labor shortages in the civilian sector. Irish day laborers were brought in to build many of the first bases but the growing demand on the labor force, combined with a dramatic increase in the number of American bases scheduled to be built, forced the British authorities to turn to the Americans for help. U.S. engineer units arrived in England and assumed much of the burden for construction in East Anglia. American military authorities categorized the work as training and did not pass on the labor costs to the British.[2]

Across East Anglia, farming communities and the surrounding rolling fields and meadows soon gave way to hordes of construction crews, heavy equipment and contractors busy building air fields, housing, hangers, and a host of other infrastructure necessary to support thousands of airman who would soon flood into the region. Rural villages soon saw air bases in operation "every five miles in each direction." The once quiet English countryside quickly became the front line in the air war against Germany.[3]

Patricia Steggles remembered the first Americans she encountered in her village near the B-17 base at Deopham Green. "We saw two Americans walking down the lane towards us, laughing and talking. I rushed into to the house to tell mum that the Americans were coming. She told me to go out and say, 'Do you have any gum chum?'"

Steggles did not remember if they received any gum but recalls that they did stop and talk to them. They were like “movie stars with their smart uniforms and carefree style.” The same scene was carried out in villages across East Anglia as the bomb groups arrived and thousands of Americans appeared suddenly in the largely rural scene. The 452nd Bomb Group with three thousand officers and men occupied Deopham Green in January 1944. The experience at Deopham Green was typical as large numbers of American air units appeared in the English countryside. At Deopham Green the unit buildings, runways and perimeter track, and the hardstands were nestled in among four villages: Great Ellingham, Little Ellingham, Deopham, and Higham.[4]

It was common for some homes to be located on the base and frequently B-17s were parked on hardstands just outside their windows. Families usually were not evacuated from homes situated on the base but given special passes that allowed children and other family members to pass to and from their home. At Deopham Green the Warren Farm on the north, Bush Green and Hillhouse Farms on the south, and a host of homes along Bow Street and other locations to the southwest of the runways were in close proximity to air operations. Other residential sections of town hosted the base living areas, mess halls, and administrative buildings.[5]

Not far as the crow flies, the 96th Bomb Group encountered similar circumstances as the unit arrived at Snetherton Health to begin operations. Malcolm Holmes and Bert Patrick lived with their parents on family farms on the base and as teenagers spent much of their free time with the mechanics working on the B-17s parked near their homes. Up and down the base perimeter other farming families lived in houses that had been there for centuries. The British made way for these new comers much the same way their neighbors in the Deopham Green area did. Twenty-four hour, around-the-clock maintenance and missions created noise levels and a sense of drama not known before in these quaint English villages. Mechanics repairing battle damage or testing the powerful Wright engines in the darkness of the night assumed an urgency in their tasks as the dawn approached and the air crews began to stir. All through the community, civilians and Americans alike, waited for takeoff and the beginning of the drama that made these villages in East Anglia the front line for the air operations over German-held Europe. Today most British families remember those mornings vividly as if it were yesterday.[6]

"I could stand on the porch and count the planes out." Depending on the prevailing winds, takeoff generally followed a familiar pattern. "They were so close you could read the names on the planes. You could tell how many missions that aeroplane had flown by the number of bombs painted on the nose." As a part of their morning routine, these students watched the attack on German targets begin over their homes and if the weather created delays, school mornings were interrupted with the rush to windows or the playground as teachers and students stood spellbound as the bombers lifted off one by one.[7]

"Sometimes the planes did not make it off the ground, crashing just beyond the trees in the fields." Ralph Franklin, who lived in Keysoe near the 306th Bomb Group at Thurleigh, remembered the explosions as the bomb-ladened bomber, carrying a full load of fuel, exploded on contact and the crew of ten disappeared forever. "Me mum did laundry for some of the boys who spent their off duty time in our home. I remember one day when the laundry did not get picked up and later someone from the base arrived in a truck to retrieve it and tell us that Johnny did not make it. Death was a cruel thing to come to know as a youngster."[8] At first Gerry Darnell did not understand the consequences of American operations at nearby Chelveston where the 305th Bomb Group flew missions during much of the war. "I was so young that I did not understand the significance of it all until one day late in the war my mother took me to Maddingly Cemetery at Cambridge and I realized that each of those white crosses stood for a soul lost forever, one that was loved by a family far away."[9]

It soon became apparent to the British the level of sacrifice that the Americans paid over the skies of occupied Europe. The battle-ravaged planes returning from daily missions were stark reminders of the danger faced each day. "We were young," remembered Patricia Steggles, "but we knew when a plane was in trouble coming in to land. We knew what each flare signal meant, whether there was death on board or wounded." Everywhere in the village, people stopped what they were doing when they heard the distant drone of the bombers returning. "We all remembered the takeoff number that morning and we began the count again as each plane came in for a landing. We searched the horizon in vain for the missing boys." That evening many of the crews surviving the mission appeared in the homes as if they had spent the day at the office. They didn't speak of the mission but sought escape in their home away from home.[10]

The villages offered other diversions that became important to their American cousins. The English pub became a vital social place for the Americans as well. Although the small villages usually had but one or two small pubs, the locals made room for the G.I.s. "Dad would usually go down to the pub with the boys [Americans] and have a pint or two with them."[11]

The British government encouraged families to invite the Americans into their homes in spite of rationing. “They would invite me to dinner but I had to be careful not to eat too much. They would spend an entire month’s rations on that meal if I wasn’t careful.” The Americans usually would show up with special gifts from their mess halls to help make up for the drain on the family’s resources. Canned fruits and meats and other delightful culinary gifts helped bridge the relationship and foster a sense of community between the two groups. Bomb group leaders were careful to encourage the sharing with their neighbors. These simple acts of kindness appear to be the more lasting of memories among the British. “I remember one Christmas the boys brought a fruit cake to our house. You have to understand, we had never seen a fruit cake before. After all these years I can still smell the cake and remember the wonderfully delicious taste of that fruit cake.”[12]

Each village usually had a community center or church hall where dances and benefits were a common occasion for the Americans. The big band music of Glen Miller and other groups, together with the jitterbug and swing, brought the sophisticated modern American world to the rural villages in East Anglia. These Americans, whether they came from the big city or rural America, seemed to take the East Anglians by storm. The bomb groups reciprocated by hosting weekly dances on base. Sometimes they got out of hand.

Usually the base sent out trucks to the surrounding villages to pick up girls who wanted to attend the dances and these same trucks would take them home—but not always. “The 96th Bomb Group sent trucks into London and loaded up with many girls who were quick to accept the invitation. These were not same kind of girls around

Snetterton Heath, mind you, we called these girls Pickadilly Commandos." Many of these women were prostitutes working the London streets and saw the trip into East Anglia as an opportunity. General Curtis LeMay, the air division commander began getting complaints from family members in London that their daughters had left in Army trucks to attend the dances at Snetterton Heath and were not coming home until a week later. LeMay contacted Colonel Archie Olds, commanding officer of the 96th, and told him "in no uncertain terms that this sort of thing has got to stop." Olds ordered his squadron commanders in for a chat and laid down the law to them. He informed them that "if we have a dance on Friday I want all those women gone by Monday at the latest." Certainly not what LeMay had in mind but more typical of the problems created by the large numbers of Americans flooding into England where they dressed like Hollywood stars, had plenty of money to spend, and often time on their hands. The British complained that there were three things wrong with the Americans: they were overpaid, oversexed, and over here, a phrase frequently repeated to me everywhere I went in East Anglia. Today they say it with a smile on their face and a twinkle in their eyes. Although most Brits were grateful for the American contribution to the war and understood the price paid by the airmen each day, these roving American Casanovas tested the patience of many who endured the brash and sometimes offensive behavior.[13]

Despite the growing reputation for womanizing, there were many defenders of the Americans who were quick to step forward and deflate those who might minimize the character or the value of the Americans in their midst. Patricia Steggles remembered that soon after the 452nd men had arrived at Deopham Green, the rector called at her house and cautioned her mother to be careful.

"I have heard rumors that Americans have been seen here at your house. You know they could be trouble." Steggles' mother listened to his admonition but said to him that "these boys are far from home and we do not have much, but they can come and sit at our fireside, and talk and be with our family." Steggles' older brothers were in the service and her mother told her that she hoped someone was taking care of her sons and that she intended to take care of these sons of American mothers, regardless of what anyone thought or said.[14]

These vignettes are but a part of the story of the community that developed between the Americans and the British in World War II East Anglia. The Goodbye Piccadilly farewell tour across East Anglia in May 2008 will visit many of those locations where during World War II, the young Americans faced the real danger of the air front across German-occupied Europe while the British families in the nearby farming communities lived out the wartime experience with their new American friends. Join the tour and reach out one last time to those long ago times. The pleasant meadowlands of East Anglia hold special memories of wartime England as the scattered base ruins remind the casual visitor of those dramatic times. An occasional Nissan hut remains behind and runways still lay along the perimeter tracks that have long since grown silent. The once busy airfields scattered across the landscape linger on as nature reclaims them from across over a half century of time. Today there are a few wartime children living in the villages and towns who can still remember those times that were filled with drama as the victory was still held in the balance. These waretime children are eager for the Americans to come back one last time. Ralph Franklin,Patricia Steegles, Gary Darnell, Mary Hudgins have more memories to share and they are but a few of those who will welcome us back home to East Anglia. These children of the war are growing old and soon they will be gone too.

End Notes

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[1] This paper is part of a larger study currently underway tentatively titled “A Time for War, A Time for Community: Anglo/American Relations in East Anglia During World War II.”

[2] Barry J. Anderson, “Army Air Forces Stations: A Guide to the Stations Where U.S. Army Air Forces Personnel Served in the United Kingdom During World War II,” unpublished manuscript, Research Division, USAF Historical Research Center, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, 1985, p. 4; Oral interview, Mary Huggins by Vernon L. Williams, August 25, 2003, Little Ellingham, England, East Anglia Air War Project (hereafter cited as EAAWP);

[3] Huggins interview, EAAWP; Anderson, “Army Air Forces Stations,” p. ; Roger A. Freeman, *The Mighty Eighth: A History of the U.S. 8th Army Air Force,* London: Macdonald and Company, Ltd., 1972, pp. 7-8.

[4] Oral interview, Patricia Steggles by Vernon L. Williams, August 26, 2003, Great Ellingham, England, EAAWP; Field notes and photograph records, East Anglia Base Site Surveys, August-September 2003, EAAWP; Deopham Green base map located online at http://www.70thhistoricalsociety.org/b17/pics/station142.jpg.

[5] East Anglia Base Site Surveys, EAAWP.

[6] Oral interview, Malcolm Holmes by Vernon L. Williams, August 20, 2003, Snetterton Heath, England, EAAWP; Oral interview, Bert Patrick by Vernon L. Williams, August 20, 2003, Snetterton Heath, England, EAAWP; Geoff Ward by Vernon L. Williams, August 20, 2003, Snetterton Heath, England, EAAWP; East Anglia Base Site Surveys, EAAWP.

[7] Huggins interview, EAAWP; Oral interview, Evelyn Collins by Vernon L. Williams, August 26, 2003, Great Ellingham, England, EAAWP; Oral interview, David Beal by Vernon L. Williams, August 26, 2003, Great Ellingham, England, EAAWP; Oral interview, Ralph Franklin by Vernon L. Williams, September 4, 2003, Keysoe, England, EAAWP.

[8] Oral interview, Gerry Darnell by Vernon L. Williams, August 28, 2003, Rusden, England, EAAWP.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Steggles interview, EAAWP; Holmes interview, EAAWP; Ward interview, EAAWP; Oral interview, Alan Phoenix by Vernon L. Williams, August 26, 2003, Great Ellingham, England, EAAWP; Oral interview, Peggy Neal Maynard by Vernon L. Williams, August 27, 2003, Great Ellingham, England, EAAWP.

[11] Oral interview, Peter Lister by Vernon L. Williams, September 3, 2003, Buckden, England, EAAWP.

[12] Oral interview, William Goudeket, Jr. by Vernon L. Williams, December 17, 2003, Tulsa, Oklahoma, EAAWP; Oral interview, Samuel William Smith by Vernon L. Williams, February 20, 2003, Fredericksburg, Texas, EAAWP; Steggles interview, EAAWP.

[13] Ward interview, EAAWP.

[14] Steggles interview, EAAWP.