

“I’LL BE



SEEING YOU”



Dr. Vernon L. Williams

- Military Historian and Professor of History
- Director, East Anglia Air War Project
- Ph.D. in American Military History, Texas A&M University, 1985

East Anglia Air War Project

Dr. Williams grew up in an Air Force family during the 1940s and 1950s. His father, M/SGT Andrew L. Williams, served first in the Army Air Corps in 1942 and later retired from the U.S. Air Force in 1964. During World War II Sgt. Williams served in the Pacific war with the 509th Composite Group, the unit that flew the two atomic bomb missions from Tinian Island in 1945. Sgt. Williams was responsible for the modifications to the bomb bay of the *Enola Gay*, the B-29 aircraft assigned the first mission to Hiroshima. Later he named his only daughter after the famed aircraft, Enola Gay Williams Boyd. Interestingly, in recent years Enola Gay worked for Boeing Aircraft, the very firm that manufactured the B-29 bearing her name.

During the years growing up, Dr. Williams traveled with his family while his father served in assignments in England, Bermuda, Okinawa, Amarillo AFB, Westover AFB before returning to Amarillo AFB where his father retired in 1964. These early years nurtured a growing respect for the men and women who served in the military as the future historian grew up on air bases scattered across the globe. Later he would write of these World War II veterans he had encountered growing up and dedicated his career to the preservation of the history of WWII America.

Professor Williams’ uncle, S/SGT Harold F. Norris served as a tail gunner in the 381st Bomb Group at Ridgewell, England. On 4 August 1944 Norris’ crew took off aboard the B-17 named *Dry Gulcher* for a mission to Peenemunde, Germany. Thirty minutes after takeoff, the plane caught fire while forming up. While the pilot struggled to keep the plane straight and level amid the smoke and fire in the cockpit, the bailout bell sounded and the crew began to exit the aircraft. All of the crew except Norris parachuted to safety, landing in the small village of Shalford not far from Ridgewell. The aircraft came down not far from the village center and Norris was found in the wreckage nearby, the only one of the crew to die that day. Today he lies with his comrades at Maddingly Cemetery near Cambridge.

Dr. Williams’ research on the last flight of the *Dry Gulcher* led to the creation of the **East Anglia Air War Project** and to his efforts to preserve the history of both the men and women of the 8th Air Force and the story of the British families who lived and worked in the small rural

villages surrounding the American bases in East Anglia. Out of that project have come countless oral history interviews, significant document and photographic archives, and a growing number of film documentaries produced and directed by Williams. One of the first films to be produced was *Dry Gulcher Down: a B-17's Fiery End over Shalford Village*—the first of seven films produced to date, with more scheduled for release in 2009 and 2010.

A veteran of the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Army in the 1960s, Williams returned to civilian life to attend the university, the first person in his family to do so. In 1985 Williams received a doctorate in American military history from Texas A&M University. His dissertation focused on the history of the U.S. Navy in the Philippines during the Spanish-American War in 1898 and the years that followed. Following graduation Williams began a long career of teaching and writing military history that continues to this day. Early publications included chapters on naval history in several books, articles and essays in numerous publications, and papers presented at conferences for over twenty-five years. Recently Professor Williams has published a new edition of his first book titled *Lieutenant Patton*, a book on the early career of General George S. Patton of WWII fame and has completed two new book manuscripts currently in press. These include *Empire Marine: General Littleton W.T. Waller and the Growth of American Imperialism, 1856-1926* and *The Undaunted: Buffalo Soldiers in Texas, 1861-1891*. Dr. Williams has taught military history for over twenty years. During the past five years Williams has moved his scholarship into World War II and all of his research and writing deals with the air war and the impact that conflict had on the people of that generation. He has written numerous papers on the Eighth Air Force and wartime operations in Britain's East Anglia region. He is currently working on a new book on the Eighth Air Force in World War II tentatively titled: *A Time for War, A Time for Community: The Anglo-American Cultural Exchange, 1942-1945*.

Professor Williams has traveled across the United States and throughout England, interviewing the WWII generation. In the United States he has interviewed hundreds of air and ground crews who served in the Eighth Air Force in wartime England. In England, Williams has sought out British family members who lived in the small rural villages that surrounded the American bases during the war. Young boys and girls, together with older brothers and sisters, have detailed their experiences living among the “Yanks” during the war. Using these extraordinary digital video interviews of both the Americans and their British neighbors, Dr. Williams has produced and directed seven documentary films about life in the East Anglia farm lands and the air front that extended from runways across England's heartland deep into the darkness that was Hitler's empire in Europe. In the spring of 2004 Williams traveled to Los Angeles to accept the National Broadcasting Society's Best Documentary for 2004 award for his *Deopham Green*, a film about the 452nd Bomb Group stationed at Deopham Green near Norwich on the British coast. Other films have followed: *From Pyote to Fortress Over Europe* (the 381st Bomb Group at Ridgewell), *Thurleigh Memories* (the 306th Bomb Group at Thurleigh), *Hells' Angels* (the 303rd Bomb Group at Molesworth), *Liberators Over East Anglia* (a film about the fourteen B-24 Liberator bomb groups of the 2nd Air Division in eastern East Anglia) and a new digitally, remastered *Target for Today*, 1943 film produced by the War Department about air operations in the Eighth Air Force. Two new WWII films are currently in production, due to be released this year, *Deenethorpe: The 401st Bomb Group and the Quest for Peace* and *Thurleigh at War*. *Deenethorpe* is the story of the 401st Bomb Group at Deenethorpe, near Cambridge and their role in securing the victory in the air war during World War II. *Thurleigh at War* details the

wartime experience of both the British families and the Americans who lived and service in and around the 306th Bomb Group base at Thurleigh in Bedfordshire, England.

“These films represent important new additions to our knowledge of World War II because the voices that speak are the voices of those who lived the history of that time,” explained Professor Williams. “With the technology available to us in this new digital age, the World War II generation can continue to teach generations of Americans who will be born long after World War II has faded into the distant past. So in a sense these men and women of the Greatest Generation will live forever as their stories will survive long after they are gone from the earth.”

Williams continues his teaching and writing career at Abilene Christian University (ACU) where he teaches courses in military history, World War II, and the American West while mentoring a new generation of independent film producers in his course on Historic Documentary Production. All film production students produce documentaries on World War II.

Professor Williams lives in Abilene, Texas with his wife, Kay, who is a professor of music at ACU. They have three grown children and three grandchildren.