

A local vet takes a sentimental journey

By Si Liberman
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When I first tried to visit the site of my old World War II air base near Norwich, England, 36 years ago, the mission had to be aborted. In 1963, what had been the Attlebridge-area home of the 466th Bombardment Group had become the largest turkey farm in Europe. A turkey quarantine prevented my family and I from ever reaching the property.

Ultimately, though, better planning and a gracious British couple's commitment to helping former American airmen with their sentimental journeys produced a different outcome.

Ted Clarke is a retired British computer programmer who volunteers to serve as a guide for ex-Yank airmen with his wife, Joyce.

Our first stop was the downtown Norwich Central Library. It is also the site of the Second Division's living memorial to the 6,000 Liberator bomber crewmen who lost their lives in the war. The 8th Air Force, which included our Second Air Division, lost 44,472 airmen and 9,057 aircraft during World War II.

An outside fountain contains the insignias of the Second Division and the 8th Air Force. Stones from each of the 50 states are embedded in tile, serving as a reminder of the United States' contribution to Britain's survival. Inside, a heavily trafficked memorial room is lined with shelves stacked with books about the U.S. and displays of B-24 Liberator bombers and 8th Air Force memorabilia financed by ex-airmen's contributions.

Downtown bustled with hundreds of pedestrian shoppers, double-decker red buses, and stop-and-go traffic. It was a sharp contrast from those days 50-plus years ago when the blacked-out area vibrated with exploding bombs and formations of American and Royal Air Force bombers en route to German targets.

Nearby, the old dance hall we called Muscles Hall, was still luring young couples, but now as a disco called Ritz's.

But, aside from the towering 12th century Norwich Cathedral and Muscles Hall, nothing seemed familiar. German air raids killed or injured more than 1,400 residents of the city and destroyed or damaged thousands of homes between 1940 and 1945. Almost the entire city has been rebuilt and is now ringed by suburban sprawl.

The city of Norwich and Attlebridge, site of the airfield, are separated by 8 miles of farms and woodlands. The short trip was nearly as heart-thumping as any



The 466th Bomb Group of the 787th Bomb Squadron posed for a photo at their base near Norwich, England. Radio operator Si Liberman is on the bottom far right. Also picture from top left are: navigator/bombardier Bill Kroll, co-pilot Bob Bartuska, pilot Dick Lester, crew chief Fred Bennett, and waist gunner Wilson Hamilton. Bottom from left are nose gunner Joe Kramer, tail gunner Frank Penskysky and armor gunman Larry Baker.

of the 13 missions I had flown as a teenaged radio gunner.

And, suddenly, there it was—the airfield property. Not a sound, no planes, just a field of weeds, concrete rubble and turkey sheds. You'd never believe this flat, weed-infested terrain was once the launching pad for more than 200 missions against Nazi Germany's war machine.

Shuttered turkey houses sit next to broken runways. The airfield control tower has been refurbished and is headquarters for Bernard Matthews' vast farm operations. What was the base theater, is now a gutted shell and pile of bricks. Only the projection room portion of the building remains.

"Your barracks was probably up there," Clarke said, pointing from a narrow dirt road to a thick cluster of trees. "That's where the enlisted men's Quonset buildings were."

There wasn't a building in sight—just more forest.

Cathy Thomson, an outgoing young mother, now owns the property that includes what had been the base headquarters and briefing room buildings. The historic nature of the property is what grabbed them, she said.

The frame, one-story, former base headquarters building has been their five-bedroom home for

more than 10 years, and an adjacent Quonset building, formerly used for briefing flight crews, is a giant storage shed.

"Former 466th men will always be welcome," she said. "It's historic site, and you're a part of it."

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