

398th Bombardment Group (H)
Phoenix Reunion 2007
Farewell Banquet speech by Malcolm 'Ozzie' Osborn



Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen. Earlier this year, Allen Ostrom contacted me and asked if I would assist him in producing an issue of Flak News, (Volume 22, #2, April 2007), concentrating on the 8th Army Air Force bomber bases constructed in East Anglia during WWII. The idea was to produce a map of the bases and then interview people living throughout East Anglia making notes of their reactions and comments. This coincided with the American Military Cemetery at Cambridge requesting my assistance, in preparing a photographic exhibition, putting faces to the names of those 398th BG and 55th FG personnel interred in the cemetery. So first I started by researching what was involved in building just one Bomber Base in the English Countryside in 1942.

- 18,000 tons of dry cement
- 90,000 tons of aggregate
- 3,000,000 square feet of concrete
 - one main 6,000 foot runway
 - two 4,200 feet short runways
 - 54,000 feet of taxiing space
 - 32,000 square yards of tarmac
- 400,000 cubic yards of excavated soil
 - twenty miles of drain
 - ten miles of conduit
 - six miles of water main
 - four miles of sewer
 - ten miles of road
 - 4,500,000 bricks
- Total cost of \$4,000,000 @ 1942 prices
- In 1942 a new airfield was started every three days

People often ask me why I have such a passionate interest in the 398th Bomb Group and indeed the whole 8th Army Air Force. My good friend Geoff Rice has given me a copy of a speech which I would like to read to you tonight;

“As soon as we beat England we shall make an end of you Englishmen once and for all. Able-bodied men and women will be exported as slaves to the Continent. The old and weak will be exterminated. All men remaining in Britain as slaves will be sterilised, a million or two of the young women of the Nordic type will be segregated in a number of stud farms where, with the assistance of picked German sires, during a period of 10 or 12 years, they will produce annually a series of Nordic infants to be brought up in every way as Germans. These infants will form the future population of Britain. They will be partially educated in Germany and only those who fully satisfy the Nazi’s requirements will be allowed to return to Britain and take up permanent residence. The rest will be sterilised and sent to join slave gangs in Germany. Thus, in a generation or two, the British will disappear.”

Speech by Reichsminister R.W.Darre Berlin – 1941

On 30th December 1941, after spending time with President Roosevelt, Winston Churchill travelled to Canada where he made a speech to the Canadian Parliament. It was during this speech when Churchill made yet another of his famous remarks. Churchill spoke of the French Generals, who, after their capitulation in 1940, had mistakenly informed their Prime Minister; “In three weeks England will have her neck rung like a chicken. **Some Chicken; Some Neck.**”

By 1944 the 8th Army Air Force had grown rapidly into the ‘Mighty 8th’ an incredible logistical feat that remains unsurpassed to this day.

8th Army Air Force Bases in East Anglia during WWII

- At it’s peak in 1944
 - 200,000 personnel
 - 2,800 heavy bombers
 - 1,400 fighter planes
 - 40 Bombardment Groups
- 1 Radio Countermeasures Group
 - 15 Fighter Groups
- Stand on the East Anglia Coast and it would take the 8th AAF bomber stream over sixty minutes to pass overhead.

It was as though an American Bald Headed Eagle had settled over East Anglia
Some Eagle; Some Neck

So, armed with all my material, plus the map of the bomber bases so skilfully produced by David Ruberg and Allen Ostrom from my earlier researches, Joyce and I started out with the interviews of local East Anglian people. The idea was to show them the map, tell them what it represented and then record their comments.

We spoke to an elderly gentleman in a restaurant in a garden centre near Cambridge. What a find this was, it transpired he used to be an electrician on the 91st BG base at Bassingbourn. He recalled seeing a B-17 Fortress come home, barely able to fly, firing red flares as it had wounded aboard, touching down with a bounce, then turning off the main runway just as a German Me 410 fighter/bomber strafed the airfield. “I could have cried, those boys had somehow brought that bomber home, then this Jerry fighter hit it as it made it’s strafing run across the airfield. What must those injured boys have thought at that moment?”

An elderly lady’s late husband had been a Navigator in Lancaster Bombers and he had always commented on the close proximity of all the 8th AAF bases to one another.

A man recalled being a boy and running over to the fence of his local 8th AAF airfield, “I would call out – hey Mister, how many bombers did you lose today then?”

A very attractive, young hotel manageress, studied the map, amazed at all those bases, and then with a far-away look in her eyes commented “wow, all those hunky young men!”

That brought up the old cliché ‘Overpaid – Oversexed – Over-here’. My late friend Russ Blowers, 55th Fighter Group, told me that his buddies had a good response to that; “Trouble with you guys, you are ‘Underpaid – Undersexed – and Under-Eisenhower”

But the most common remarks were without doubt – How many airfields? Are you sure? Show me that again. How did they all take-off and land without hitting one another then?

We used to discuss with the interviewees the scenario of the FAA/CAA trying to take control of the Mighty 8th during mission launch and recovery. We ended up with a hypothetical scene whereby a young Air Traffic Controller arrives at 8th AAF HQ and starts asking questions, viz.

ATC - “So when do they all take-off? “

8th Ops – “Oh, say 0715”

ATC – “Staggered take-offs?”

8th Ops – “No, all at the same time”

ATC – “What about the weather?”

8th Ops – “Has to be almost zero visibility before we scrub take-off”

ATC – “So who controls them?”

8th Ops – “They do, they control themselves, they all know what to do. It’s all done with strict radio silence.

ATC – “Well there must be collisions surely?”

8th Ops – Yes indeed there are, all sorts of take-off incidents, they are mostly hundreds of pounds above maximum take-off weights, lifting off into an overcast that

might extend upwards of 5-10,000 feet” “But the majority always get airborne safely”

ATC – “What about coming back, how do they find their own base, then what are landing procedures?”

8th Ops – “They do that for themselves. Of course, they won’t all be coming back; there will be aircraft down in many areas of Europe, in fields across East Anglia, but the majority will make it home, albeit with dead, dying and wounded airmen aboard. They will fire red flares, they will land OK.

ATC – “What happens tomorrow?”

8th Ops – “They will do the same thing all over again”

ATC – Turns white, goes very quiet, then leaves the room.

Of course there was a heavy price paid for daylight bombing.

- 7031 aircraft lost
- 26-28,000 fatalities
- one tenth of Americans killed in WWII
- Fatality rate = 12.3% of the 210,000 crewmen who flew in combat
 - 18,000 wounded in combat
 - 28,000 prisoners of war
- Highest casualty rate in the U.S Armed Forces in WWII.

For me personally, just being here in Phoenix with you all, sharing such fellowship and friendship is very special. I have wanted to attend a 398th reunion in the USA for so many years; this is like a dream come true for me. I have made personal connections these last few days; Jim and Dorothy Crouch were the first veterans I actually shook hands with in 1976. Yesterday, thanks to her daughter Carolyn, I was able to call Dorothy Crouch and speak to her. This is the first reunion she has missed and she sends you all her love, wishes she was here with you, but I know she is in spirit.

Also in 1976 I met Louis & Betty Stoffer. Here in Phoenix, I have had the pleasure of meeting Jim White, who flew co-pilot with Grinter along with Stoffer on ‘Here’s Hopin’ which crashed on take-off on Christmas Eve 1944. Sadly, two young American airmen perished that morning, Flores and Harrod. Luckily the rest of the crew, although with injuries, made it out alive. In 1976 my close friend Vic Jenkins and I took Louis Stoffer into the field where his ship crashed and helped him find some small pieces of it. I have been able to tell Jim White that the concussion from the exploding bombs in that awful crash shook down two shell cases containing flowers above the little altar in the 398th chapel. I find it so symbolic that as two young Americans lives were sacrificed, at this special time of year, flowers were scattered on the altar of their chapel.

A huge surprise and special moment when I discovered a good friend and indeed a ‘Little Friend’, Frank Birtciel and his lovely Wife, Velma, were here. Frank Birtciel flew with the 55th Fighter Group, in aircraft named ‘Miss Velma’, so what an honour to discuss Locomotive-Busting, air combat, and airfield strafing with such a great fighter pilot. In 1976 I had made contact with Jack Jenkins and Kenneth Sorace two of Frank’s fellow fighter pilots.

Gentlemen is it any wonder that I always feel totally humbled when I am in a room with you, I am in awe of all of you.

God Bless you all.

God Bless America

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you.

