

## Three Generations Return to AAF Station 131 once more

Brandy Howard and her Father, Ken, had a plan to bring the 398<sup>th</sup> BGMA members back to Nuthampstead in 2008. When I attended the Phoenix reunion last year, Brandy and I shared the rostrum whilst she outlined her proposed trip back to England. I promised Brandy we would be there for her the whole time, planning and organising, working closely with her and Ken as we made the ideas become reality. I told them to just get the party over to the UK and Ozzie and Peter Brooke would do the rest. Taking on the role of tour organiser, travel guide and Remembrance Service designer seemed daunting but I gave it a go. Keeping closely in touch with Ken and Brandy, I started contacting many friends and acquaintances and began planning & organising each day.

**Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> June.** Saw the safe arrival of all the attendees in the UK, except for Melissa and Jim Ledlow who were travelling in from Normandy and Elliot and Gregg Novek who were not due to leave JFK until Thursday night. Lee Anne Bradley flew into Stansted early morning, where Joyce and I were waiting to take her to stay at our home. Wednesday night I gave a slide show in Anstey Village Hall, on the operational history of AAF Station 131, the 55<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group & 398<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, this kicked off our 'Long Weekend of Remembrance'. Amazingly, a jet-lagged Lee Anne managed to not only stay awake, but managed a quick beer with us at The Woodman Inn on the way home!

**Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> June.** Peter Brooke drove us down to Heathrow where we met the Richmond's coach for our first excursion, a trip to Chartwell, the home of Sir Winston Churchill. Peter followed behind as I boarded the coach and said hello to all the reunion party on board. Our good friends Elaine Tyler and her partner Richard Harris were there to greet us at Chartwell where they so generously paid admission for all the 398<sup>th</sup> party, which now included Melissa & Jim Ludlow, having arrived by taxi from the rail station. Elaine and Richard also gave out £10.00 vouchers towards lunch, what a great couple they are. The weather turned unseasonably cold and damp, but it was warm in the House and some braved the cold after lunch to visit the beautiful gardens. We later bade farewell to Elaine and Richard and headed up towards Cambridge and the Crowne Plaza hotel, with Peter following behind just in case we had any emergencies.



A Happy Group at Chartwell – June 12<sup>th</sup>.

From left; Ozzie, Joyce, Elaine Tyler, Richard Harris, Marie Bammer, Arnie Schneider, Lee Anne Bradley, Ken Howard, Lillie Burke, Lew Burke, Terence St Louis's cap, Helen Howard, Lydia St Louis, Ralph Ambrose, Ann Collins, Frank Yarmoski, Melissa Ledlow, Cathy Jo Yarmoski, Sandra Yarmoski-Petrocco, and Jim Ledlow

**Friday 13<sup>th</sup> June.** This day, like the one following, had taken a great deal of planning and we had to keep to a reasonable timetable to make it work. Just five minutes before we were due to leave the hotel in Cambridge, Elliot Novek and Son Gregg arrived in a taxi from Stansted – phew! My tick list now showed the following safely on board; Brandy, Ken & Helen Howard, Lew and Lillie Burke, Arnie Schneider & Marie Bammer, Melissa & Jim Ledlow, Terence & Lydia St.Louis, Ann Collins, Elliot & Gregg Novek, Frank Yarmoski with Daughters Cathy Jo & Sandra. We filled the rest of the coach with British enthusiasts, including Cliff Bishop and Brother Stan. I had arranged a surprise as we made a small diversion off the road and drove up the full width runway at Eye Airfield, once home to the 490<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group. Here we were greeted by Clive Stevens in his staff car and no fewer than four of the veterans climbed aboard for the short drive to Horham and its famous Red Feather Club.



All aboard and ready for the chauffeured drive to Horham

Arrival at Horham, once home to the 95<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, showed two jeeps waiting for us, along with my good friend Frank Sherman, who had opened the museum just for us. A chance to see the famous murals painted in WWII, the excellent photographic collection, museum artefacts, aircraft models plus coffee and tea, made us all feel so welcome. Whilst the rest of us made our way to the haunted Scole Inn by coach for a buffet lunch in our own private dining room, some of the ladies climbed on board the jeeps for the drive. Suitably refreshed, we set off, along with a jeep escort for the drive to Thorpe Abbots Tower Museum, once home to the 100<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group. As we drove through the local villages the jeeps sounded sirens and horns – they certainly knew the 398<sup>th</sup> were visiting. The museum had opened just for us, plus allowed access along the only piece of full width taxiway right up to the Control Tower. We all entered the Varian Centre where one of the 100<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group museum staff gave us a brief talk on the history of Thorpe Abbots and the famous 'Bloody 100<sup>th</sup>'. Everybody then took their time browsing around the control tower and the other huts making up this world famous museum. Then at 1630 it was time for the drive back to Cambridge through the pretty Suffolk County countryside. The coach driver put some WWII tunes on his sound system and we had a good old fashioned sing-along for a while.



Clive Stevens with Elliot Novek, Terence St.Louis, Arnie Schnieder, Lew Burke and Frank Yarmoski,  
By the tower at Thorpe Abbotts.

**Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> June.** A very nervous Ozzie arrived at The Woodman Inn with Joyce and Lee Anne at 0830. Shortly after, the first of the secret Ghost Squadron Crew arrived, to be hidden away at the back of the car park. Stevenage Sea Cadets arrived bang on time and after a quick briefing started traffic control. Stagestruck, based in Anstey, arrived to provide a sound system, along with technician, all provided free as their contribution to the Remembrance weekend. By now all of the Ghost Squadron had arrived and were hidden over the back of The Woodman near the old 602<sup>nd</sup> dispersal. Peter Brooke arrived towing a trailer full of chairs, which we quickly spread out. Then the coach arrived from Cambridge with its special passengers. Local people had been arriving for some time as the clock edged towards 1130am. Service programmes were handed out, people took their seats, and the buzz of conversation grew. The Sea Cadets marched smartly to the 398<sup>th</sup> memorial and stood just behind the hedgerow, some stood ready to raise the flags. I started the service on time at 1130am. After my introductions and Peter's welcoming speech, Brandy started the first reading:-

### ***Letter to St. Peter***

*Elma Dean*

*Let them in, Peter, they are very tired  
Give them the couches where angels sleep.  
Let them wake whole again to new dawns fired,  
with sun not war. And may their peace be deep.  
Remember where the broken bodies lie...  
And give them things they like. Let them make noise.  
God knows how young they were to have to die!  
Give swing bands, not gold harps, to these, our boys.  
Let them love, Peter, they have had no time -  
They should have trees and birds songs, hills to climb,  
the taste of summer in a ripened pear.  
Tell them how they are missed. Say not to fear,  
it's going to be alright with us down here.*

Exactly on cue, the Ghost Squadron appeared as Brandy read the moving poem, they walked to the 398<sup>th</sup> Memorial and looked at the inscriptions, then walked down to the memorial

seat to David Wells, where most stood and some sat, silently, unaware of any people present. This was something I had dreamed about for a long time, a moving and respectful tribute to the crews lost in combat. This was the first time anything like this has ever happened during a service in the UK, the crew felt honoured to do this for our five veterans.



The guys had travelled many miles, some making a 250 mile round trip, and actually stayed until 2030 that night, when Peter Brooke took them to Anstey to view the 398<sup>th</sup> memorial window. After the service they donned their Class Twos and joined us all for a superb buffet lunch in The Woodman, with fish n' chips, chicken, toad-in-the-hole, all good English grub from the 1940's – when food rationing allowed! Seeing GIs, plus uniformed and most attractive ladies, eating in The Woodman was most eerie, like stepping back in time.



Other service highlights were; young Hannah, a sea cadet, reading a short poem, Lee Anne Bradley reading the Salute to The Veterans so beautifully, Lew Burke's personal address and reading a moving message from Wally Blackwell, the bugler who played Taps and Reveille with emotion, seeing the children from Barkway School lay their little floral tributes on each memorial.

Lunch over; it was time to climb aboard the coach for 'Wally's Tour'. Oh how I wish Wally could have been with us as we set off for a grand drive around dear old AAF Station 131.





Then we parked up on the airfield, close to the flag pole on runway 17/35. Here, Ralph Hall's casket flag was carefully pulled down and replaced by that of Lesley Rolfe's late Father, who passed three years ago. Lesley, assisted by me, raised her Father's casket flag herself, a very moving moment for her and indeed all of us present.



Then we heard the unmistakable sound of a Merlin engine, as a P-51 Mustang made a fast pass over our heads and proceeded to give us a five minute display, all courtesy of Peter Brooke. What a magnificent way to close the day, as we all climbed aboard for the trip back to The Woodman Inn where we waved goodbye to all the 398<sup>th</sup> party as they headed back to Cambridge.

**Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> June.** We all attended church at St George's, Anstey. This was a service of communion, but also commemorated the 55<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group and 398<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group. We then drove to The Woodman Inn for a grand 'Hog Roast', courtesy of Julian Clark and Peter Brooke. The Reverend Carol Kimberley and her husband joined us, along with Elaine Tyler and Richard Harris who had driven up from Sussex for the church service also. After a relaxing time we climbed aboard the coach for a drive to the American Military Cemetery at Cambridge. Here, Arthur Brookes from the AMC was waiting for us, where he made a welcoming speech and the five veterans laid the floral tribute in memory of their comrades.

Arthur then presented the 398<sup>th</sup> party with a flag previously flown over the AMC; this will be taken to all the 398<sup>th</sup>'s Stateside reunions and placed in the Memory Room. All 398<sup>th</sup> graves were marked with flags and Arthur was on hand to rub sand from Omaha Beach into the headstones, to enable clearer photographs. But there was a further surprise to come. As we were the last people in the cemetery, (Arthur kept it open just for us), he requested that the five veterans bring down the USA flag, and then fold it into a triangle. Arthur played the US National anthem, UK anthem, and then Taps on the Carillion and Arnie Schnieder slowly pulled the flag down. The five vets wasted little time in expertly folding the flag, what a great bunch of guys they are. Thanks Arthur, for making it such a moving and memorable visit to the AMC.



Arthur Brookes presents the AMC flag to the veterans



In honour and memory of fallen comrades



Arnie lowers the AMC flag

**Monday 16<sup>th</sup> June.** The coach arrived at Bassingbourn, once home to the 91<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group, at 0940 for our visit to the Tower Museum. This was where William Wyler filmed much of the wartime documentary 'Memphis Belle'. After a welcoming speech by the curator, Chris Murphy, the group slowly viewed all the exhibits. Then back on the coach for a drive around the original full width WWII taxiway, the only one left in the UK. But I had another surprise

now come to fruition, thanks to my good friend David Crow. A spirited drive saw us arrive at Steeple Morden, once home to the 355<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group, where the European Aerobatic Display Champion was in the hold waiting to give the 398<sup>th</sup> a private little air show. Now what a display that was in his little Laser aircraft, even going backwards at one point, which we all know is impossible! Wow, after that we listened to David telling us about the impressive 355<sup>th</sup> FG memorial, then we drove to the church at Littlington to view the 355<sup>th</sup> FG memorial window. This is unique as it was actually made in the USA, the only stained glass window made in the USA and assembled in a 16<sup>th</sup> century frame in the UK.



Basingbourn Tower Museum



Air Show especially for the 398th



David Crow talks about the impressive 355<sup>th</sup> FG Memorial



The 355<sup>th</sup> FG Memorial window  
Made in the USA

We then drove to IWM Duxford to spend the rest of the day looking at the exhibits in this famous museum. Then it was back to the Crowne Plaza for the farewell dinner later that evening. Brandy & Ken had commemorative coins for everybody, Lew presented a signed copy of Hal Weekley's book to me, a wonderful surprise. I had also shown my slides on the 55<sup>th</sup> & 398<sup>th</sup> throughout dinner. Suddenly it was time for us all to say our goodbyes, after all that planning and organising, six months had somehow been compressed into five wonderful days. Thanks everybody, you are all such great friends to have.

**Let's do it again in two thousand and ten – please.**