

# Days When the Ground Shook

*Still visible in England's East Anglia are reminders of the "Mighty Eighth."*

By Eric Minton

The distant low-flying aircraft was only a toy, a radio-controlled model buzzing through the sky at Shipdham, near Norwich, England. The plane could not be seen from Shipdham's World War II control tower, now a derelict shell.

Still, the toy's droning was a reminder of the days—from May 1943 to June 1945—when the ground around this field shook with the rumble of Shipdham's B-24s as they lined up and then rolled down the runway to join ever-larger armadas of the U.S. Army's 8th Air Force on bombing raids against Hitler's Germany.

Four decades later, the place is comparatively still. Private aircraft sometimes use the runway, and part of the base comprises an industrial park, with a couple of old huts still standing. The tower is an abandoned ruin, a mere ghost of the American presence here, yet it is one of many such reminders of the war years haunting the East Anglian countryside today.

East Anglia is the stubby land mass that juts into the North Sea northeast of London and contains the counties of Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex and Cambridgeshire. In World War II this region effectively became the world's largest airfield. The USAAF and British Royal Air Force built more than 100 active airfields in East Anglia during the war, of which 58 hosted the Eighth's armada of B-17 and B-24 heavy bombers, B-26 medium bombers and P-51, P-47 and P-38 fighters. Another 11 8th Air Force bases lay in neighboring Northamptonshire.

The 8th Air Force arrived in England in February 1942 when General Ira C. Eaker set up 8th Bomber Command's headquarters at the evacuated Wycombe Abbey Girls' School in High Wycombe, north of London. His first combat aircraft, a B-17 Flying



*The names of the 5,121 U.S. MIAs of the European Theater in World War II are listed on this wall at the American Military Cemetery near Cambridge.*

Fortress of the 97th Bomb Group, arrived July 1 of that same year.

USAAF commanders were eager to put into practice their doctrine of high-altitude, precision bombing in daylight raids, but they faced skeptics among their British counterparts, who had turned solely to night raids.

The Eighth launched its campaign against the Germans and skepticism on August 17, 1942, with 18 B-17s of the 97th BG. Six Flying Fortresses flew a feint as the main force of 12 B-17s from Grafton Underwood, Northamptonshire, made for the real target, the railroad marshalling yards just across the English Channel at Rouen, France. With four squadrons of RAF Spitfires escorting, the mission achieved a bombing accuracy of about 50 percent, and all aircraft returned safely.

While notably cautious, the USAAF's first bomber sortie against Hitler proved a morale booster and a publicity bonanza. The Eighth was airborne. For the remainder of 1942, however, the Eighth suffered from mounting losses, dubious bombing accuracy, a majority of missions scrubbed due to weather and the diversion of aircraft and crews to North Africa.

Disappointed in the Eighth's performance, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill requested President Franklin Delano Roosevelt at their Casablanca conference (January 1943) to have the Eighth join the British in nighttime area bombing. In response, Eaker pressed his argument that changing tactics would mean retraining crews, re-equipping aircraft and logistic problems. The shift would not draw the *Luftwaffe* into battle or complement the RAF's operation. But none of that convinced the Prime Minister. What did move the famous rhetorician was a phrase Eaker used: "If the RAF bombs by night, and we bomb by day, bombing around the clock, the German defenses will get no rest." Churchill acquiesced.

It was a brutal war fought between the 8th Air Force and the *Luftwaffe*. On October 14, 1943, an Eighth bomber force of 291 planes struck Schweinfurt, with 60 aircraft lost on the raid, five more crashing on return to England, 12 written off for scrap and 121 damaged. Less than five months later, the Eighth was able to send 660 bombers to Berlin—the resulting 69 bombers MIA was deemed an acceptable loss rate of 10 percent.

To travel through East Anglia today is to see how the men of the 8th Air Force lived, not how they died. It is in these former 8th AF airfields such as Shipdham where one senses not the instinctive heroism of war but the more constant and mundane battle of late-afternoon alerts, pre-dawn wake-ups, special "last breakfasts" for which wartime rationing did not apply, briefings, bomb-loading, close-call takeoffs, scrubbed missions and mud. It was at these bases where the majority of men assigned to the Eighth, the ground echelons, spent many days waiting for their air crews to return.

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(signed) Carl A. Gnam, Jr.  
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The focal point of that wait was the tower. And many of these two-story block buildings, with balcony and crowning watch office, still stand in varying states of repair. One extreme is the ruin at Shipdham, once home to "The Flying Eightballs" of the 44th Bomb Group, 8th AF's hardest working B-24 unit. Another is the remodeled tower at Horsham St. Faith, still serving its original function, since the old 458th Bomb Group base is now Norwich's Municipal Airport. Towers at three bases—Thorpe Abbots, Framlingham and Bassingbourn—have been restored as museums containing relics of the wartime years.

Thorpe Abbots near Diss, Norfolk, contains the 100th Bomb Group museum, as reminder of the legendary "Bloody Hundredth," which flew B-17s. The tower is all that effectively remains of this famous base; the runway is currently being demolished, and the few dilapidated Nissen huts remaining are little more than barely recognizable skeletons.

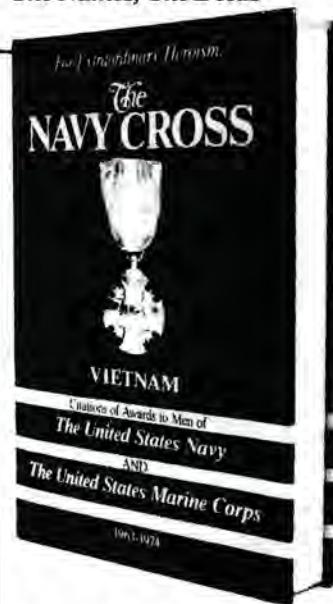
Though it suffered in the long run no more than any other group, the unit's "Bloody Hundredth" tag stuck when 12 of 13 100th BG planes were shot down on an October 10, 1943, mission to Munster. Robert Rosenthal piloted the only surviving Fortress that day, returning on two engines with two wounded men aboard. Rosenthal would go on to fly 52 missions in all.

Meanwhile, the only man to fly 100 missions for the 8th Air Force, gunner and bombardier Hewitt Dunn, flew B-17s out of the 390th Bomb Group's base at Framlingham. The 390th BG tower museum now adds to a number of tourist attractions in this time-suspended Suffolk village.

The most popular 8th AF base during the war, for both the public and servicemen, was Bassingbourn, near Royston, Cambridgeshire, a facility built and used by the RAF before the war. Its American personnel appreciated the base's relative comfort, calling it "the Country Club." With the tenant 91st Bomb Group flying the then-new B-17s and the base being the nearest to London, the 91st BG received more media coverage than other USAAF units throughout the war. The 91st also attracted plenty of enemy attention during its 2½-year tenure—it suffered the Eighth's highest losses—197 aircraft MIA. The tower museum there has plenty of material to draw on in illustrating the 91st's history, and alongside the British Army now uses the base.

The tower at Seething, Norfolk, about 10 miles south of Norwich, has been undergoing restoration to house

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a memorial to the 448th Bomb Group (B-24s). Other towers, like Shipdham's, appear destined to remain shells, no matter how significant or colorful the resident group's history.

A couple of towers have survived through reincarnation. Little Walden's tower north of Saffron Walden, Essex, recently has been salvaged from a derelict state and turned into an office building, its postal address listed as "Station 165," the USAAF designation for the base. Behind the tower stand an industrial park and residential community.

At Lavenham, Suffolk, the station's tower remains in excellent condition, thanks to its subsequent use as a residence. However, what makes this former home of the 487th Bomb Group special is that the entire flightline remains: runway, taxi-ways, perimeter track and hardstands dispersed among clumps of trees.

Many Eighth airfields returned wholly or in part to agricultural use, with new owners cannibalizing buildings to store farm machinery or shelter livestock. Corporations gobbled up other stations—though many of these are in private hands, a few are readily accessible.

One such station is Bungay, Suffolk, where one of the base's domestic sites remains virtually complete. A farm uses run-down buildings for storage where once lived men of the 446th Bomb Group, "The Bungay Buckeroos," who flew B-24s. Old Buckenham, near Attleborough, Norfolk, boasts a good sampling of technical buildings remaining, including the fire-station Nissen hut.

The flightline at Mendelsham near Stowmarket, Suffolk, is still used for small commercial and private aircraft, but a returning B-24 crewmember of the 34th Bomb Group would hardly recognize the adjoining buildings and television-transmitter mast.

The Rougham Industrial Estate now occupies the technical site of Station 468 at Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk, and has maintained many of the original buildings in such a fine state of repair that a visiting 94th Bomb Group member might not realize he had ever left the place.

The most complete airfield not now in its original use is the 96th BG base at Snetterton Heath on the A-11 highway about 20 miles southwest of Norwich. Snetterton Heath today is better known for its Sunday market, which uses the grassy plain of the flightline, and for its race-car circuit, built on part of the runway and perimeter track.

Several former 8th AF fields remain

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operational military bases. Along with  
Bassingbourn, the British Army occu-  
pies Debden in Essex and East Wre-  
tham in Norfolk. The Royal Air Force  
now flies from Wittering in Cam-  
bridgeshire, Honington and Watti-  
sham in Suffolk and Watton in Nor-  
folk. Meanwhile, the U.S. Air Force  
still uses Alconbury, Cambridgeshire.

Another base still in use is Duxford,  
a post-World War I RAF base occu-  
pied by the Eighth's 78th Fighter  
Group during World War II and now  
part of the Imperial War Museum.  
The museum offers an exhibit devoted  
to the 8th Air Force.

The RAF Museum in Hendon,  
north of London, also has an exhibit  
devoted to the Eighth in the museum's  
Bomber Command gallery. There, two  
pieces of equipment most associated  
with the Yankee presence in Britain, a  
B-17G and a jeep, are on display.  
Noteworthy, too, is the reconstruction of  
a composite barracks room, complete  
with pinups, magazines and uniforms.

Various memorials abound through-  
out East Anglia, many adorned with  
wreaths of poppies laid in continuing  
tribute during annual Remembrance  
Sunday ceremonies.

Other memorials are located on the  
airfields themselves. Sitting isolated  
on farmland between Litlington and  
Steeple Morden villages in Cambrige-  
shire, a memorial wall with protruding  
P-51 cowling and propeller honors the  
355th Fighter Group based at Steeple  
Morden.

The 2nd Air Division of the 8th Air  
Force has established a Memorial  
Library in Norwich, Norfolk's capital  
and one of the favorite liberty towns  
for 8th AF personnel. Veterans of the  
Eighth's B-24 division stock the  
Memorial Library, located inside  
Norwich's Central Library, with books  
about the United States.

The most prominent memorial to  
members of the 8th Air Force, and to  
all Americans who died while serving  
in Europe during World War II, is the  
American Military Cemetery near  
Cambridge, once another favorite lib-  
erty town for U.S. airmen. There, an  
immaculately manicured terrace of  
crosses marks the graves of 3,811  
American servicemen.

At the crest of this gentle-banking  
hill of crosses, a wall bears the names  
of 5,121 men missing in action. More  
than half the names on that wall  
belong to U.S. Army Air Force per-  
sonnel, the majority of them fliers  
with the 8th Air Force. Four decades  
ago, many of those same men lived  
under these same East Anglian skies,  
but died in flak-strewn, fighter-infested  
skies far away. □

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