

The Dropzone

VOLUME 5, ISSUE 1

FEBRUARY 2007

LEST WE FORGET

Personal reminiscences of air crew life some 60 years ago
by T/Sgt. Joe Meek of the Martin Crew

In summer the days and nights above the 40th parallel are extended, that is, in summer the days are very long, while the nights are greatly abbreviated. In June the sun sets about eleven p.m. We are the night shift for the Eighth Army Air Corps.

We go to work in the dark and come home in the dark. We are the "Carpetbaggers" attached to the Office of Strategic Services (O.S.S., later the C.I.A.). Our Group is the 801/492 located somewhere in the Midlands of England. Our prime mission is to carry French underground agents, supplies, medicine and armament to the Maquis and F.F.I. (Free French Resistance).

Our aircraft (B24Js) are painted black so that we may be difficult to see by German searchlights. Most armament has been removed - armour plating, the ball turret and bomb racks. New props have been installed to increase speed (Wow, do we ever need speed?) In March our Group was the 467th Heavy Bombardment.

We came from our training ground at Wendover Field, Utah where we had spent the winter of 1943 training to bomb Germany into submission. In our spare time we would then do the same thing to Japan, so we had expected to return to the good old U.S. of A. in a short time.

We flew our plane solo in March 1943 down the Caribbean to South America, thence to Africa and up the coast to England. We landed in Wales, thence flew to Rackheath on the east coast near to the city of Norwich. Our first five missions were heavy bombardment over rail yards in France and manufacturing plants in Germany. Germany did not surrender!

In the first part of May our Squadron (four make up a group) was sent to Harrington, somewhere in the Midlands. And so began our covert action to sneak in and punch old Adolf from the rear. I don't think he was greatly concerned.

Now it was duty calling. Tis day, we had tried to rest a little, trying not to think about the loneliest ten hours of our lives. Not much sleep, it really does get hot in England in the summer. We took off about ten o'clock, still extremely light - the sun was shining, and approached the French coast about eleven.

Flak and small arms fire everywhere! That means that we weren't welcome and please go home. Boy, are they going to be disappointed and mad. We didn't shoot back and just drove on.

Continued on Page 2



Martin Crew at Station 179, 1944
Back Row, L-R: Keith O. Martin, P; Edward R. Kregor, CP;
Gains M. Newton, B; Frederick W. Miller, N

Front Row, L-R: Alonzo G. Dixon, E; Melvin Masut, TG;
George Meador, D; Joseph W. Meek, RO

Photo Courtesy of Joseph W. Meeks

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Lest We Forget	1
Obituary	2
Editorial	4
Remembrance Day	5
Sad Events	6
First Day Cover	7
B-24 Training	8
Albert Habeny	9
Daventry ROC	11

SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST:

- *Obituaries to two great airmen*
- *Life in the R.O.C.*
- *More stories from the 'sharp end'*
- *A word from the editor*
- *Things you may have forgotten*

Subsequently we found our target, way down in the south, sorta center of France. The method we employed on reaching the target, assuming it was dark by this time, was to look for flares, flashlights or bonfires in a predetermined pattern - an X, cross or a T. We would then drop down to about 400 feet (no one ought ever to be that scared !). Like we could see the barbed wire on the fence posts. Supposed to work like clockwork - wrong !

Sometimes the Boche killed these poor French guys and took their place and then when we came down to that 400 feet, they actually tried to shoot us down. This time all went well, up up and away. It was now time to leave, and we did. Not the usual leaving this time. We had come down the River Seine, dodging Paris and on to the target. All the German anti-aircraft guns were after us so we decided to make a run west and out over the Atlantic, round the Brest peninsula and north to Blighty (England).

All was well, at least for an hour or so. Then we were spotted, trying to sneak out the back door and they let us have it. In the searchlights it was like the mid-day sun. Scared ? Even more so! What did we do ? I shot a couple of red flares - German distress signals. It seemed to work so out over Bordeaux we went and out over the Atlantic descending at 4000 feet per minute, ears popping, screaming and all those things. They missed us.

So we added an hour or two to flight time. More problems, not enough fuel to get home. And so we hit the southwest coast of England, little place called Ford. How do I remember that name you ask ?

Well, Mr. Henry Ford had contracted to build B24s during the war, thereby depriving the American civilian population from driving new Fords and depriving them from spending all that money they were making building B24s for us fly guys

Ford, England is near a place called Lands End. It was a submarine hunter base occupied by the U.S. Navy who contributed to the European war effort by jollyng around in PBYs (the Catalina, a two motor flying boat tub). Did they get surprised? You bet. Here comes some real shooting war fly boys landing on their turf.

And not only that, but we ate some of their rations. Rations? I hadn't seen an egg, a real whole egg, in the shell egg, in months. Ice cream and cokes? Yeah, they had to suffer

with rations like that. Was the Air Corps jealous? Not in the least. We still had those good old C rations, didn't we?

So, after all that was done, the Navy sent us packing. How dare people just drop in unannounced and eat up their grub ? We did and I'm glad. Nevertheless it was good to get home again. Well, sorta good. Sometimes I feel it was screaming engines, ears popping and flak everywhere. Well, it gave those German guys some target practice. I'm glad they missed. For one thing you wouldn't be reading this!

OBITUARY

AIR CHIEF MARSHAL SIR LEWIS HODGES

A Pilot who made numerous clandestine flights for the SOE after a daring escape from Occupied France



The following is an edited version of an obituary published in the Daily Telegraph on January 5th, 2007. (Abridged by John Harding)

Air Chief Marshal Sir Lewis Hodges who died at the age of 88 was one of the RAF's most highly decorated pilots; after escaping from occupied France he had an outstanding record flying clandestine operations in Europe and the Far East.

Flying moonlight operations for the SOE he landed his single engine Lysander or the larger twin-engine Hudson in remote French fields to deliver and pick up agents. He picked up two future Presidents of the Republic (Auriol and Mitterrand) - both unknown to him at the time, bringing them back to England for meetings with General de Gaulle.

Continued on page 3



Pencil sketch of Sir Lewis Hodges during his wartime years.

Picture Credit: Daily Telegraph

Earlier he had escaped from captivity after crash landing his Hampden bomber in northern France in September 1940, and returned to his squadron the following June. He had been on the run for eight months and when asked what he had missed most during that time he replied "my pyjamas" - from then on he always wore them under his uniform when flying on operations.

He was talent-spotted for special duties by Wing Commander Charles Pickard, familiar as the Wellington pilot in the film "Target for Tonight" and later killed in the daring low level Mosquito raid on Amiens jail. Pickard had just taken over No.161, one of two squadrons on SOE operations from Tempsford and he selected Hodges as one of his two flight commanders piloting Halifax bombers used for dropping agents and supplies to resistance groups in Europe.

By May 1943 Hodges had assumed command of No.161 which had been re-equipped with Lysanders and Hudsons. Using moonlit rivers and lakes as navigational aids to find small fields lit by three or four hand torches, these operations were carried out in the deepest secrecy and few in the RAF were aware of the squadron's activities. He always made a point of having a few calming words with the "Joes" before they took off. He flew his last SOE operation to France in February 1944 by which time he had been awarded both the DFC and the DSO.

Following a rest in the Bomber Command operations staff he was appointed to command No.357, a special duties squadron in south-east Asia. Equipped in India with Liberators, Dakotas and Lysanders they supported resistance hill men in Burma, and later in Thailand and Malaya. He was awarded a bar to his DSO. After the war he served in Haifa and returned home on October 1946, attending the RAF Flying College from where he flew a Canberra PR7 in the London to New Zealand air race.

In 1956 he took command of RAF Marham and in October he took a force of Valiants to Malta with the object of bombing the Egyptians in the Suez campaign. From then on he held many ground appointments including Commander in Chief of Air Support Command, Deputy C in C Allied Forces Central Europe and Air ADC to the Queen. He retired from the RAF in 1976



Freddie Clark, author of Agents by Moonlight, on the left and Sir Lewis Hodges on the right, with Ron Clarke during their visit to the Museum in September 2001

Picture credit: Roy Tebbutt

EDITORIAL

by John Harding.

Welcome to this winter edition of "The Drop-zone". Inevitably, with the museum being closed, we will have little to report but we hope that you will find the articles of interest.

Firstly, some comments on points brought up at the last committee meeting held at the end of October, 2006. :-

Work is still required on the roof of the museum. One estimate had been received and this was for an unacceptable amount of £35,000. It was agreed that under Roy Tebbutt's supervision, Keith Taylor and Fred West would work on a repair programme. At the time of writing (mid January) this work has been started and, with the same team, interior painting is now going ahead.

Whilst on the subject of roof repairs, we are pleased to report that two major donations have

been received, one of £300 from the Hollowell Steam Society and a second one of \$1000 from the 801st/492nd Bomb Group Association. There were also two other private donations - \$100 from Bill Boyd and £100 from Gina Glover - many thanks indeed. These generous gifts will be put towards the cost of roof repairs which will be essential to the continued existence of the museum.

The problem of fly-tipping, mentioned in our last issue, appears to have been resolved by the County Council fitting a gate with lock and chain across the Harrington Road entrance to the airfield.

It is gratifying to note that attendance figures for 2006 were broadly similar to the previous year and it would appear that most of our customers were attracted, not by magazine adverts, but by 'word of mouth' and museum road signs.

Thanks were expressed to the two 'handy men', Jim and Ray, for all the valuable work they carry out over the year on behalf of the museum.



The Cenotaph in Whitehall, London
12th November 2006

Remembrance Day in London

by John Harding

I and approximately 70 others attended as members of the Royal Observer Corps Association. Most people will remember the R.O.C. for its work during the war, tracking and reporting enemy and friendly aircraft flying over the U.K.

On the morning of Sunday the 12th November, five of us made an early start by joining a bus at Watford Gap which had started its journey from Coventry. Traffic was quite reasonable on the way down to London and we eventually arrived at Horse Guards Parade Ground at about 0945. An hour later we marched into Whitehall, ready for the service which we were able to see on a large TV screen.

After that we marched down Whitehall, past the Cenotaph with the massed bands playing, quite an emotional few moments. The march continued down Whitehall with a right turn by Big Ben and a final right turn back towards Horse Guards and past the saluting dais, this year the salute being taken by HRH the Duke of Gloucester.

Once dismissed, we all went our separate ways for the afternoon. Our group of five decided to go down by the Thames to have a look at the comparatively new 'Battle of Britain' memorial with its wonderful carvings relating to that event. Later we went on to the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square to see some of the many world famous paintings which hang there.

Finally, at 1700 we were back at the meeting point for the bus back home. It had been a particularly memorable day and one which I am hoping to repeat in 2008.

Remembrance Day at Harrington 2006

Members of the Harrington Aviation Museum Society and Northamptonshire Aviation Society were joined by a number of Harrington residents on Sunday 12th November for a Service of Remembrance at the Carpetbagger Memorial.

Roy Tebbutt provided the Union Flag and the wartime 48 star version of the Stars and Stripes of the United States of America, while Ron Clarke and Tom Reeves took care of the wreaths, and standard prayers to the fallen.

Mrs Marion Illsley, a lay reader from Harrington, gave a short address and offered prayers in remembrance of all those who gave their lives in the defence of our country.

After the service, members and guests returned to the museum for a finger buffet.



Tom Reeves and Marion Illsley at the Memorial



Airfield memorial
12th November 2006



Service at the Memorial

A Sad Turn of Events

By

Virgil R. Marco

(Information provided by Dirk Vijverman,
HAALERT-BELGIUM)

The target, May 28, 1944, was "Osric 53" in Belgium. At an altitude of 7,000 feet the "Carpetbagger" aircraft, "C for CHARLIE", made three DR's, but there was no evidence of a reception at the target. The aircraft had just swung around to begin its homeward journey, when it was suddenly attacked by a night fighter and received three damaging bursts.

According to Fred Tuttle, a crew member, this attack occurred at the checkpoint, Enghien. The fighter was shaken off, and the B-24, with another Gee fix obtained, turned north. Another attack came from the side. Enemy bullets ripped through the right wing tanks, through the fuselage and navigator's compartment. Violent fires broke out and since the pilot, Henry Wolcott, could no longer maintain control of the airplane pushed the bail out alarm.

All the crew bailed out successfully but one whose chute failed to open. The Belgian patriots began finding the airmen and hiding them from the Gestapo while the enemy was desperately searching the surrounding villages. The B-24 bomber crashed at the village, Aaigem, hamlet Ashage in a pasture near Countess Du Parc.

After a week of unsuccessful searching, the Gestapo planted an imposter posing as an Australian airman. The imposter, named Martens, walked the streets of Aaigem, Ressegem and

Burst asking for help. Help was offered the impostor but after a thorough interrogation in Aaigem he was found to be a Gestapo plant.

The Resistance then took the impostor to the home of one of their members and imprisoned him in a dry-water well awaiting his execution. Before this could take place, the impostor, Martens, escaped. By pleading with the family to let him go to the toilet he tricked them. The father and his adult daughter fell for the request and helped him out of the dry water-well to use the toilet. The Resistance group arrived shortly and found that the impostor was no longer in the toilet and had escaped by climbing the back wall and disappeared.

The impostor informed the Gestapo what happened at Aaigem with his interrogation by the Resistance. He then pointed out the various homes of the people who interrogated him as well as the family where he was placed in the dry water-well.

On July 21, the day Belgium has celebrated its independence since 1830, the Gestapo arrived at Aaigem, Ressegem and Burst where they arrested 19 Patriots and interrogated them in the presence of the impostor, Martens. The Gestapo searched each home of the 19 Patriots for guns and documents of the Resistance as well as the clothing of the "C for Charlie" crew. They found nothing.

The 19 Patriots were then taken to Oudenaarde and Gand for more interrogation and then to the prison of Gand, "Nieuwe Wandeling". After being tortured a few were set free and the rest were transferred to the concentration camp of Neuenamme in Germany. Only a few returned home after the war.



Wolcott crew 406th BS

Standing L-R:

William G. Ryckman - Navigator

Henry W. Wolcott III - Pilot

Robert F. Auda - Co-pilot

Wallis G. Cozzens - Bombardier

Kneeling L-R:

Dirvin D. Deihl - Engineer

Richard G. Hawkins - Tail gunner (KIA)

Frederick A. Tuttle - Dispatcher

Dale S. Loucks - Radio operator

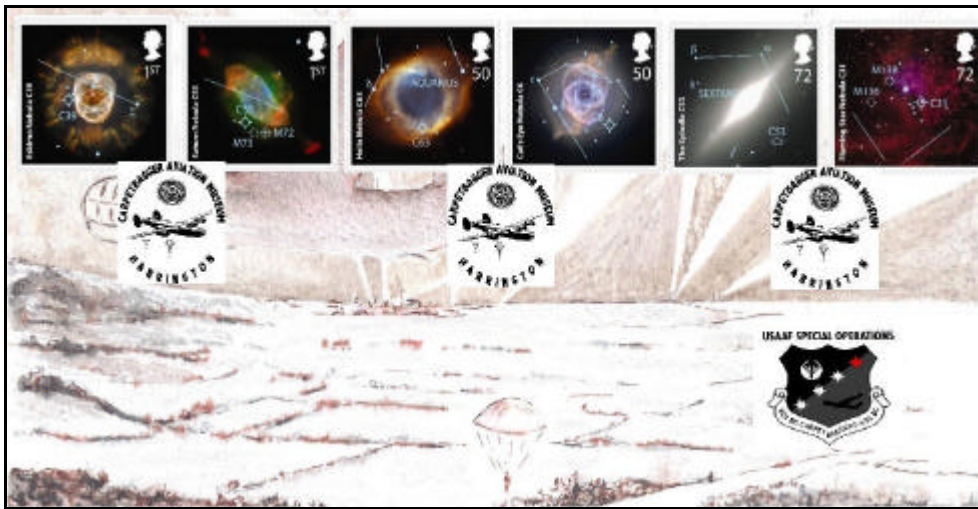
**“Carpetbagger” airmen
honoured by stamp issue.**

On 13 February 2007 a new stamp issue will honour American airmen who flew secret missions from Northamptonshire deep into enemy territory. It will be in the form of a first day cover for Royal Mail’s “Sky at Night” stamps. The design by artist Michael Bannard shows a B24 Liberator bomber dropping a British agent as part of “Operation Carpetbagger” during World War Two. On the reverse are original wartime photos of the black B24s operated by the USAAF 801st/492nd Bomb Group and the memorial that now stands to them. The Carpetbagger museum logo is the postmark cancelling the stamps on their first day of issue. The cover has been published in conjunction with Bletchley Park, another location with a secret or two.

Bletchley Park Post Office is known around the world for its first day and commemorative covers. Some are now fetching hundred of pounds GBP on auction sites. Using a combination of original art

and postage stamps it transforms the humble envelope into little pieces of art and history. Originally set up by volunteers to raise funds for Bletchley Park it has helped many other charities and museums with their fundraising. As ‘Postmaster’ Terry Mitchell said, “Raising funds for small museums such as the Carpetbaggers Aviation Museum at Harrington is never easy. Most stay open purely because of the commitment and enthusiasm of their volunteers in providing visitors with a super day out. The covers provide us at Bletchley Park with extra income and it is a pleasure to be able to do the same for others. We all have great stories to tell which provide a rich source of material”.

Only 300 of the limited edition cover will be issued and it can be previewed at www.bletchleycovers.com. It costs £12.50 (\$25US) plus £1.50 UK post and packing (\$5US) from Bletchley Park Post Office, The Mansion, Bletchley Park, Milton Keynes, MK3 6EB, UK. Phone; +44 (0) 1908 272690/631797.



Representation of the front of the First Day Cover



Not exactly a Carpetbagger B24

Carpetbagger Training

The following is re-printed from the December 2005 issue of "The Carpetbagger" and is an extract from the book "A Kentucky Colonel Remembers" by Lt. Col. George Hoerter.

The first few days after arrival consisted of TOP SECRET briefings and getting settled in our new quarters - Quonset huts. There was a stove in the center of the hut, there was no running water. Our latrine facility and bathhouse were in separate buildings, a few steps from our living quarters.

We were briefed on the mission of our organization, code named "Carpetbaggers" and the importance of secrecy. We were directed not to maintain a diary, nor could we write to our loved ones back home about what we were doing or even the location of our base.. As officers we censored out our enlisted crewmember's mail and our mail was censored by officers at squadron headquarters. Of course, when we went off base, nothing was to be said about our activities. Those who lived nearby our base at Harrington knew that we flew black B24 bombers and that we flew at night. It was hoped that the local populace figured we were just 'Yank' supplement to the RAF whose mission was night bombardment.

American bombers of the 8th Air Force flew only daylight bombing missions. The Carpetbagger operation was controlled by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) which became the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) after World War II. The primary mission was to provide the Maquis (the French Underground) with logistical support so our aircraft were configured to drop containers, not bombs. The containers were loaded with guns, ammunition, grenades, food, money, radios, clothing and whatever else was needed for clandestine operations.. From time to time we also dropped agents by parachute who carried out sabotage operations in an ongoing effort to harass the German occupation force.

The containers were dropped with an attached parachute from an altitude of 400 feet above the terrain. When personnel were dropped, we flew at 800 feet altitude.. Their parachutes were attached to a static line in the aircraft that 'popped' their 'chutes three seconds after they left the aircraft. They also carried an emergency chest pack in case their main 'chute failed to deploy, but at 800 feet, the emergency 'chute did not provide much insurance.

In addition to supporting the French underground, we were also called upon to furnish comparable support to the underground units in Denmark, Norway and Germany itself.

Within a few weeks of my arrival, the 801st Bombardment Group (Prov.) commanded by Col. Clifford J. Heflin was designated the 492nd Bomb Group. I was assigned to the 858th Bomb Squadron with Lt. Col. Robert Boone as my commanding officer. The reason for the change, as I recall, was that the 'old' 492nd Bomb Group, a heavy bombardment outfit, had been decimated by enemy fighters and flak in their daylight bombing operations towards the end of July. Some of the surviving crews were transferred to Harrington as well. I remember one of the pilots, a Lt. Edward G. Blume. He was an ordained minister when he joined the army air corps and from time to time he would preach at the base chapel.



Modified B24 for Carpetbagger work

As a newly assigned crew from the States, we went through a training program. We familiarised with our old B24 D and H models that we flew in Tonopah, not the new 'J' model that we flew from San Francisco to Burtonwood, England a month before. They had been modified for Carpetbagger operations. The ball turret had been removed. The three foot wide circular hole where the ball turret had been was covered with a thick, hinged piece of plywood. The hole was called the 'Joe Hole'. Personnel being dropped behind the lines would sit with their feet dangling in the hole before they were dispatched.

Those jumping were called 'Joes' and our crewman who slapped them on the shoulder to indicate time to jump was called a dispatcher. Up to three Joes could be dispatched on one pass over the target. With the ball- turret removed, there was no need for two of our crew members. William French from West Virginia, our ball turret gunner and Harry Penn from Texas, a waist gunner, were transferred to another 8th Air Force Bombardment unit.

Continued on page 9

I never saw them again but they did survive the war. Our other waist gunner 'Murphy' was designated dispatcher so he had to go on TDY (temporary duty) for a few weeks to another base to receive special training for the job which included parachute jumps.

Our training included low level cross-country flights both day and night. As co-pilot on the crew, one of my primary activities during this training period was to be checked out as first pilot, even though it would not change my status with the crew. It was insurance that, in the case of emer-

gency, I would be considered qualified to fly the aircraft from the left seat. It did not imply that I would be given a crew of my own.

Capt. Charles E Archambault, an instructor pilot and our Squadron Operations Officer, checked me out after a few hours flying which included emergency procedures and several night landings. I later ran into Lt. Col. Archambault in Kimpo, Korea in December, 1950. He was a weather officer stationed there and I was flying a C47 from Itazuke, Japan, assisting in the evacuation of troops prior to the North Korean advance to Pusan..



Lt. George Hoerter in the co-pilot's seat of a B-24 on a training flight over England in the summer of 1944



Capt. George J. Hoerter when Maj. Gen. Spivey's aide-de-camp

Maj. (Ret.) Albert Habenev, USAAF



Lt. Albert Habenev

As this newsletter was nearing completion, Roy received a letter informing him that former Carpetbagger, Albert Habenev, passed away on Friday 12th January, 2007.

Lt Albert Habenev joined the USAAF in January 1943. He underwent training in Texas as a Bombardier before joining his crew for flight training on the B24 in Wyoming.

He arrived with his crew at Harrington in May 1944, joining the 36th Bomb Squadron of the 801st Bombardment Group. The crew with 2nd Lt Arden B. Walling as the pilot took part in intensive low level night-time training, to prepare them for secret missions with the "Carpetbaggers".

Continued on page 10

Lt Habeney flew on his first combat mission to France on 23rd July 1944. During the next three months Lt Habeney flew on 19 combat missions to France, Belgium and Holland. He was awarded the Air Medal with 2 Oak Leaf Clusters for these missions. On the 5th November 1944 the crew of 2nd Lt Walling were sent on detached service to the 406th Night Leaflet Squadron based at Chedington. During that month they flew on 8 propaganda leaflet dropping missions over Holland & Germany. A further Oak Leaf Cluster was awarded during this period.

Lt Habeney returned with his crew to the 856th Bomb Squadron at Harrington, flying on training missions. On the 21st January 1945 2nd Lt Walling with Lt Habeney as Bombardier flew on an OSS C-47A 'Dakota' Mission to Rome. They returned on the 28th of January. On the following night the crew flew on a nine hour mission to Norway in company with a second B24.

The mission took place in a blinding snowstorm, the mission was successful and the crews returned safely to RAF Leuchars in Scotland. No other aircraft flew on Special Operations that night due to the storms.

In February 1945 Lt Habeney flew on two further combat missions to Denmark. During their com-

bat missions the crew survived a crash landing at Lyon in France. In the closing months of the war he flew on training flights in C-47s, B-17s and B-24s. His fourth Oak Leaf Cluster was awarded after his final combat mission.



The Wedding of Lt. Habeney and Miss B. Palmer



Lt. Arden Walling's Crew, Harrington 1944

Rear, 2nd Lt. H. Bass, Co.Pilot, S/Sgt. J. Solomon, Gunner,
S/Sgt. H. Thomas, Radio Opp. 1st Lt. L. Anderson, Navigator

Front, 2nd Lt. A. Walling, Pilot, S/Sgt. K. Kernodie, Gunner,
1st Lt. A. Habeney, Bombardier, T/Sgt. W. Waddams, Eng.

On Thursday 14th June 1945 Lt. Habeney married a local lady, Miss Beryl Palmer, at Weston Favell Church, Northampton. In July 1945 Lt. Habeney returned to the USA on a "Victory Ship" with the 492nd Bomb Group.

Lt. Abeney was awarded the following decorations for service with the 492nd Bomb Group:

The Air Medal with 4 Oak Leaf Clusters; US Defense Medal; European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal; 3 Overseas Service Bars, each representing 6 months active service overseas.

Albert Habeney was discharged from the United States Air Force Reserve in August 1957 with the rank of Major.

Photographs and artefacts pertaining to Lt. Habeney's service with the 492nd Bomb Group are on display in Harrington Aviation Museum.

Daventry R.O.C. Post 1938 - 1991

By John Harding

Many of you may already know of my association with the Royal Observer Corps and the fact that for 43 years I was a member of the Daventry Post. I joined in 1948 as an Observer, in 1953 I became Post Instructor in the rank of Leading Observer and in 1964 until disbandment in 1991 I was Head Observer in the rank of Chief Observer.

What happened on the Daventry Post could well apply to many other posts within the Corps so I thought that it might be worthwhile to shed a little light on its history before it gets forgotten with the passing of time (and probably myself as well).

Firstly a brief overview on the Corps as a whole. (This was covered in some detail in my article in "The Dropzone" Vol.2, Issue 2 of August,2004.)

The Observer Corps was officially set up in 1925 with two Groups at Maidstone and Horsham. In 1929 all volunteers were sworn to secrecy and became Special Constables under the control of the Air Ministry.

By 1935 the Corps had spread into Bedfordshire, Oxfordshire and Cambridgeshire. On August 24th, 1939 Chief Constables were ordered to mobilise the Observers and by that time the network of posts covered most of England and Scotland.

Class "A" observers signed up for a minimum of 56 hours per week and Class "B" observers signed up for 24 hours per week. By this time there were 34,000 observers who reported aircraft movements from approximately 1,500 above ground posts to something like 25 different Operations Rooms where aircraft were plotted and reported onwards to Fighter Command.

In 1941 His Majesty King George VI granted the title of "Royal" and in that year women were admitted for the first time. In 1944, 796 observers were accepted by the Royal Navy for duty on D-Day landing ships. At the end of the war in Europe in May 1945, a stand-down of the Corps was ordered.

In January 1947 the Corps was re-formed due to the looming "Cold War". Then in 1955, it was announced in the House of Commons that the Corps was to undertake a Warning and Monitoring role (reporting of nuclear bombs and fall-out).

In 1958 construction began of 1,563 underground reporting posts and 25 underground Ops. Rooms, control eventually passing from the Air Ministry to the Home Office.

In 1968 there were large defence cuts and the size of the Corps was cut by a half; this was the time when Fighter, Bomber and Transport Commands of the RAF were amalgamated into Strike Command. The Corps continued with its role of nuclear reporting until finally, in September 1991, a stand down was ordered and in the following year it was totally disbanded.

So much for the general history. Before my memory disappears altogether, I will try to give some idea of how the Daventry Post evolved from its inception in 1938, the year before the outbreak of the Second World War, to disbandment in 1991.

Mr. David Lake, who had been in the naval Battle of Jutland in World War I, was the Science Master at Daventry Grammar School, and in 1938 he was called upon to set up an Observation Post on the top of a local hill called Newnham Hill. About 20 men were recruited from the Daventry area, most of whom were above call-up age and they held regular meetings (probably weekly) in a small room on the top floor of the local Conservative Club.

At that time there were no uniforms, but each member was issued with a Special Constables' arm band and a 'tin hat'! The observation post was a square or rectangular piece of canvas which was nothing more than a wind break. Members would have to learn aircraft recognition as well as many spoken sequences for reporting aircraft under different circumstances.

The method of reporting was by telephone land-line and one observer would wear a head and breast set which was connected to the GPO telephone line.



66 Post Daventry, with instruments

Continued on page 12

Daventry post reported directly to Bedford H.Q and was also connected to two other posts, the Cluster being Daventry (P 2.), East Haddon (P 1) and Crick (P 3). The whole system of reporting depended on getting the height of the aircraft correct and it was possible to obtain a "corrected height" by using the Post Instrument.

When an aircraft passed directly over a neighbouring post, the aircraft would be sighted up in the instrument and a pointer would be moved out on the map table to that particular post and it was then possible to read off the correct height. Simple? It was when you got used to it and of course, practice makes perfect.

I can remember most of the war time volunteers and when I think about them I realise that most were local businessmen. Two brothers, the Wakefords, were builders and it was they who in 1944, built the new above-ground post. It was built of brick and was a great advance as far as comfort was concerned – but more about that later.



66 Post Daventry, with aerials on Borough Hill

Early in the war the canvas shield had been replaced by a wooden structure that had a rest room on the ground floor and an observation point above it. This is where the all important Post Instrument would be housed, with usually two observers stationed up there, one doing the reporting and the other, wearing a pair of self-focussing binoculars, would look out for aircraft .

As far as I remember, it was the one who reported who also operated the instrument.

In 1942 new uniforms were issued to all members and these were RAF blue battle dress type in a rather uncomfortable "hairy" material. Although women were also admitted for the first time in that year, most of them worked at the Operations Rooms or Centres. Daventry Post was always an all-male outfit.

Two rifles with ammunition were also issued with instructions that they were only to be used in the event of the approach of one or more enemy tanks!

One Observer from the Daventry Post (Maynard Green, a local accountant) volunteered for seaborne duties in 1944 and after intensive training at Bournemouth he became one of 796 who were accepted for duty on DEMS (Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships) which operated on and after D-Day, the 6th June, 1944. Most of the Seaborne Volunteers remained on the ships for about two months, their main duty being to identify friend from foe.

Maynard told me before he died some years ago that he was posted to a U.S. ship whose crew seemed to resent his presence at first but he soon became accepted as one of them. He was also responsible for stopping the gun crew firing on at least one of our own aircraft which I seem to remember him saying was a B 24 !

Another war-time member, Mr. Frank Butler, told me how they managed to get solid fuel up to the post in one of the hard winters. Another member owned a garage at the bottom of the hill and in those days the sales of petrol were severely restricted so he diversified and amongst other things sold bags of coal and coke. Frank, on more than one occasion, got out his sledge and pulled bags of fuel, a distance of about half a mile, up the steep hill to the post site – hard work indeed.

The new brick-built post that I mentioned was constructed by the side of the wooden one in 1944 and again consisted of a downstairs room with outside wooden stairs leading up to the observation room. Downstairs there was a boiler room, with coal fired boiler, that had radiators connected to it.

Upstairs where the two observers were on duty, the brick built wall was about shoulder high and was open to the elements except that a glass surround up to head height gave some protection. There was a very small room on one side for shelter in case of extreme conditions.

Continued on page 13

With the end of hostilities in Europe in May 1945, the Corps was given the order to "Stand Down" although in reality it continued on a care and maintenance basis.

During all this time from August 24th 1939 until the 8th May 1945, the Post had been continually manned, 24 hours per day, and a diary had been kept of all observations and weather conditions, etc. The original diaries were later forwarded to the RAF Museum at Hendon for safe keeping but we did manage to make Xerox copies, one of which is in our own library - interesting reading if you have a little time to spare.

Soon after the war, in January 1947, in one of the worst winters in living memory, the Corps was again mobilised and many war time members re-joined, but not all. Mr Lake continued as Head Observer and the Post Instructor was a local butcher, a Mr. F.J. Borton who had held this position all through the war. He was soon to resign and his position was taken by Mr. Ron Dodson, a schoolmaster, who was at that time head of the village school at Flore.

I joined the ROC in May 1948 after completing two and a half years National Service in the RAF. Having had a life long interest in aircraft the ROC seemed to be the ideal organisation for me and so it was, although eventually its role changed significantly.

We continued to be under the control of Bedford Group, but since the re-formation the post was only to be used for exercises. These were held more or less on a monthly basis, some at week-ends and others during week-day evenings. Fast low flying aircraft were given priority (code named RATS) and for the first time in 1947 an annual Master Test was introduced.

At first this was solely an aircraft recognition test on a cinema screen with 50 moving shots each lasting about one second. I remember attending the first of these at the Gaumont Cinema in Northampton, where they were held on Sunday mornings. Later this evolved into both a recognition test and a written test on procedures.

In the 1960s the need for aircraft reporting had diminished and the test became solely a written test, finally, in the 1980s, changing to a multiple choice type of test.

In all I think that I took this test about 38 times and managed to gain a "Spitfire Pass" on 35 occasions. We approached these tests very seriously, spending weeks swotting prior to each exam. There was no financial reward of course, just the personal satisfaction of knowing we were 'on top of the job.'



John Harding at R.O.C. Post 66
Swotting for a test? (note wall art!)

Another big event in the annual calendar was the annual camp that was always held at an RAF Station in the summer. Each camp was open for a period of five weeks and we could choose which week we wanted to attend. During the 1950s the RAF actually put up low flying jets (Meteors and F86 Sabres) so that we could report and plot them.

In 1953 I was appointed Leading Observer (Post Instructor) after the resignation of Ron Dodson. At that time our post was transferred from Bedford Group to Coventry Group whose HQ was actually located at Lawford Heath, near Rugby. Eventually with ever increasing speeds, the plotting became more difficult and in June 1955, it was announced in the House of Commons that the Corps was to undertake a Warning and Monitoring role i.e. the plotting and reporting of nuclear bombs and fall-out.

New underground Posts and underground H.Q.s were built from 1958 – ours at Daventry was actually built around 1964, but due to a disagreement with the owner of Newnham Hill, the new post was built about a mile away on the neighbouring Borough Hill, right amongst the masts of the BBC transmitting station. The above ground post on Newnham Hill was eventually demolished and the only thing that remains today is the concrete base upon which it was built.

We all had to learn lots of new procedures of course, and in general the whole thing, for me at least, became less exciting. With the move of post site and the introduction of so many changes, Mr. Lake resigned and I became Chief Observer, holding this position until the disbandment of the Corps.

Continued on page 14

We had just got “into the swing of things” as far as new equipment and methods were concerned when the Government, in 1968, introduced massive cut-backs throughout the Armed Services.

Bomber, Fighter, Transport and Coastal Commands of the RAF were amalgamated into one force called Strike Command. Our organisation was reduced in size by fifty per cent and one of the casualties was our neighbouring post at Crick whose members either had to leave or join some other posts – eventually quite a few of them joined us at Daventry.

The last aircraft reporting exercise had been held in June 1965 and from then on all reporting was done from our underground post – details about this are given in the August, 2004 issue of The Dropzone. Also in 1968, we had yet another move when we were put under the control of Oxford Group. This was to continue until 1982 when we moved back again to Coventry Group H.Q.

Radio was introduced to our post in the late 1970s, one post on each Cluster being so equipped. This was to allow radio communication between that one post and its HQ. Unfortunately it was found that the VHF radio would not operate from amongst the forest of BBC masts where we were situated so the radio was eventually moved to the Wolston 65 post.

Developments continued over the years with electronic transmission of nuclear data, but ROC summer camps were still held and we also had a monthly Journal issued to each member that, surprisingly enough, still contained aircraft recognition tests etc.

We lost and gained people over the years but

the hard core remained until the end, three or four people serving for over 30 years.

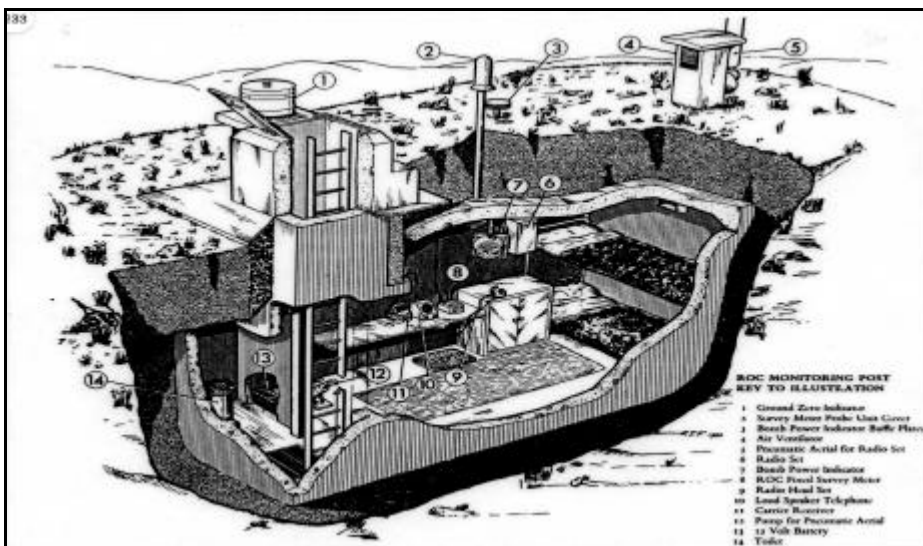
During this time with the nuclear reporting role the whole organisation was transferred from the Ministry of Defence to the Home Office – not a good move in the eyes of many members. Lastly, in 1991, when the Berlin wall had been demolished and the Soviet Union ceased to exist as such, Kenneth Baker, the Home Secretary, announced that the ROC was to



Daventry Post members at “stand-down” of the ROC in May, 1945

be “stood down” – it was quite a bombshell to us all and in September of that year that is what happened.

Protests were held but to no avail. Certain Sector Operations Centres continued for another year and after that it was the final curtain in the history of the ROC. In 1992 the underground post at Borough Hill was filled in and as if to say “this really is the end”, all except one of the BBC masts were pulled down – the end of an era in more ways than one.



An underground ROC Post

Things you may have forgotten

1. The first recorded flight of a full size heavier than air machine that carried a man took place in Yorkshire.

After a lifetime devoted to the study of aeronautics, Sir George Cayley, at the age of 80, built a full size glider to test his theories of wing design, which was launched from the slope of a hill on his estate.

Sir George had built many gliders and even allowed small boys to ride on them while they rose a few inches off the ground, but they had always been secured by ropes that were held by Sir George's puffing and panting estate workers. This time there were no ropes and the 'pilot' was not a volunteer!

Sir George ordered his coachman to climb into the contraption that was then pushed down the hill by estate workers until it lifted off and glided across the valley. It crash landed on the other side and a shaken but uninjured coachman had to climb back up the hill where he promptly tendered his resignation from Sir George's service. Flying aeroplanes was not in his job description!

It was almost a century after his death that Sir George Cayley's contribution to aeronautics was finally recognised.

2. Before the end of the 18th century the French army were using hot air balloons to observe enemy troop movements. It is no surprise therefore that a hundred years later another nation was considering the same use for aircraft, even though there had yet to be a successful powered flight.

Professor Samuel P. Langley, an early aviation pioneer, had successfully flown a model airplane that was powered by a 2 horsepower steam engine and the U.S. Government provided funds so that he could build a full-size aircraft that might be of use to the military. At that time, 1898, America was at war with Spain.

Professor Langley duly built a full size aircraft that for some reason, he decided to launch by catapult over water. At the first attempt the craft hit an obstruction on take off and crash-landed. He rebuilt it, but the same thing happened again. Before he could try a third time the Wright brothers made their successful powered flight and all the other aviation pioneers were quickly forgotten.

3. The first heavier-than-air machine to fly a war mission was a Bleriot Type X1 monoplane.

In September 1911 Italy declared war on Turkey with the intention of taking over Libya and seizing the Ottoman-Turkish provinces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica

and on the 4th October Italian troops landed at Tobruk.

On the 23rd October Capt. Carlo Piazza, commander of the air detachment, took off in a Bleriot to fly over the front line and observe the Turkish-Arab positions. After about an hour, he returned to base in Tripoli to make his report. And so ended the first military reconnaissance flight.

Two days later, October 25th, Capt. Riccardo Moizo flew over Turkish position and came under attack from small arms fire. The fabric of the Nieuport he was piloting was torn in a number of places and this became the first heavier-than-air machine to be damaged by enemy fire.

His report on the position of the enemy column ensured that the Tripoli garrison was well prepared when the Turks arrived on the 26th October, and the attack was repulsed.

Christmas Dinner 2006

On the evening of Monday 4th December 2006, HAMS members met at Harborough Golf Club for the annual Christmas Dinner.

Christmas cards were exchanged, and after an excellent dinner there was a raffle with quite a number prizes. Mick Gray sold the tickets, provided most of the prizes and supervised the draw, which made £41.

At the close of the evening, Mrs Vera Tebutt was presented with a bouquet of flowers by the chairman, Ron Clarke, in recognition of all her hard work in organising the dinner.



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We are always in need of articles for the newsletter. Send any material to John Harding c/o the museum or email hjohnharding@aol.com

TWO THINGS WE DON'T WANT YOU TO FORGET

- 1 Your subscription to HAMS for 2007
- 2 The Annual General Meeting at the museum on Monday 27th February 2007



Where are you?

In The Dropzone Vol. 4 issue 2, we reported on the visit to the museum of Miss R. Yager, grand-daughter of former Carpetbagger Arthur Bogusz, who flew with the Clinton Rabbitt crew.

Since her visit, we have tried to contact Miss Yager by email, but have so far not received a reply. If she happens to read this, we would be obliged if she could send an email to caswest@aol.com as we have some further information to pass to her.

Happy Birthday

The 28th of December 2006 was a special day for Mrs Vera Tebbutt, when she celebrated her 80th birthday. Son Roy organized a dinner for Vera, her family and close friends, at the Bulls Head Inn, Clipston. The meal was excellent, and everyone had a thoroughly enjoyable evening.



Vera and Roy at the party



John Harding found time while in London on Sunday 12th November to take a photo of the new Battle Of Britain Memorial.