



Special points of interest:

- The 401st Bomb Group and the East Anglia Air War Project

- A new book, *Little America*, is underway, to be based in large part on more than 20 years of oral interviews.

- How you can be a part of the work of the Foundation

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Newsletter

Supporting scholarship and film in the area of military history, American culture and history, and global crisis where the United States and its people played a role

2023 Reunion Keynote Address Marks Latest for 401st Bomb Group Involvement with East Anglia Air War Project

by Vernon L. Williams

On July 22nd last year, I spoke at the Reunion Banquet for the 401st Bomb Group, based at Deenethorpe, England during World War II. That evening marked the latest 401st involvement with the East Anglia Air War Project. When I first began work on the Project in 2002, I had no idea what the future held for me or the extraordinary people that I would encounter on that long and winding

My speech at Seattle, *The Road Thus Traveled: Following the Air War Trail from Deenethorpe to the American Heartland*

road.

The speaking assignment gave me an opportunity to look back at “the road thus traveled,” and remember some of the 401st people that I had encountered along the way. There were many, both American and British, that included the



World War II generation, and the 2nd and 3rd generations who keep the history alive.

On October 2, 2014, I received an email from Robert L. Hecker. I had just released my documentary film on Deenethorpe and the 401st Bomb Group. Hecker, pictured above with the George McKay crew (back row, 2nd from left). He introduced himself in the email,

“Vernon, I thought this might be of interest to you. I’m a veteran of the 401st Bomb Group (flew 30 missions as squadron, then group lead bombardier). I’ve seen your documentary on the 401st and thought it was great. I made my living for more than 50 years after the war, writing and producing documentary and other information films.

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Frank Perez, Ball Turret Gunner



Sgt. Frank Perez, ball turret gunner, 401st Bomb Group

I first met Frank Perez in San Antonio in 2012 at the 8th Air Force Historical Society Reunion. Frank's oral history interview added important new stories to the wartime narrative, both on the British homefront and on dangerous missions in the skies of occupied Europe.

For example, Frank recalled one memorable trip to London on pass. "I remember going to London, and I was in bed when the Germans were bombing that area. And I remember the sirens went off, and the different people said, 'Go to the shelters' and stuff like that. And I said, I'm just staying here. I said, when I'm

flying in combat, they're pointing their guns at our plane, and the fighters are coming at our plane to try to knock it down. Here, nobody's pointing any particular deal at me. If they hit me, it'll be by accident, you know."

Frank appears in my *Deenethorpe* film and adds to the dramatic story of the air war from Deenethorpe.

"Throughout the region, small communities made way for the construction of large-scale air-dromes."

The Writing of *Little America* has Begun in Earnest

The interview window has just about closed, and the writing of the first book to be based on over two decades of research and interviews has begun.

The human story of the air war follows the Yanks in combat and British families who hosted the Americans

in villages all around.

My immediate writing target is the first three chapters.

- *Little America, A Sense of Place*
- *The Red Cross, the Aero Clubs and Clubmobiles*
- *Race: The Shifting Landscape*

I anticipate finishing the manuscript in the summer of 2026, two and a half years in the writing.

I published *Flight Surgeon* in 2021 and in just a few months, I will see my biography, *Empire Marine*, appear. With that volume in the final stages of production, I will now embark on the next major project, *Little America*.

Keep track of my progress on the OPHF website (see page 4)



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At one time, I helped organize and was national president of the Information Film Producers of America. But lately, I have been writing novels, music and stage plays. My musical “Honestly Abe” has been running in New York off-Broadway for two years. At this moment, a production of my musical, “Flak House” [based on his novel *Rush to Glory*] is rehearsing in NY for an off-Broadway premiere this month.

Over the years, I have talked to Robert on the phone, hoping that one day that I meet him in person. But I never did. He died in 2021 at age 99. Over his career since the war, he compiled an extraordinary literary record, one that he only briefly mentioned in his first email to me.

In the time since I first began the East Anglia Air War Project, I have traveled to Deenethorpe and the nearby towns, interviewing British children who lived near the 401st base during the wartime days. Paul Knight and Maureen Masden were two who remembered the war and were a part of a number of interviews that I did in England that added to the 401st story. Both appear in my Deenethorpe film and help bring their wartime world to life.

Also in England, I got to know Graham Brantley, who was the British representative for the 401st Bomb Group in England. He would welcome veterans and families who came back for a visit and do many other things. Brantley helped me by organizing a group of wartime children for me to interview. arranged for interview venues, and on two occasions led a tour of the old base. The photographs at right show scattered buildings that lingered on since the war.

Donald Byers was the historian for the 401st BG Association. Donald really made a difference in supporting the East Anglia Air War Project and making sure that the 401st was well represented in my history work.

Second generation family members and 401st officers Josie Navarro and Rick Kaufman continue to be a part of my work on the 401st. They and others on their team are preserving the history in reunions and in their support of projects like mine. They are an extraordinary group of guardians of the history of the war.

So Saturday evening’s speech and special program presented that night confirmed to me that the road thus traveled so far has been a worthy mission



Above: Deenethorpe, March 6, 2001. Photographs by Col. Susan O’Konski, USAF (Ret), who was with me that day.

Below: Colonel Harold W. Bowman, Commanding Officer of the 401st Bomb Group, and combat crew members talk things over at Deenethorpe, March 25, 1945. EAAWP Archives, Abilene, Texas.



for me, and for all those whom I have encountered along the way.



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*Supporting scholarship and film in
the area of military history,
American culture and history, and
global crisis where the United States
and its people played a role.*

The mission of the Old Primero Historical Foundation (OPHF) is to produce historical scholarship and film in the area of military history, American culture and history, and global crisis where the United States and its people played a role. The OPHF oversees documentary film production, scholarly writing projects, and cooperates with other institutions to develop conferences and other scholarly opportunities for scholars engaged in military history and related subjects of interest to the OPHF.

OPHF funding comes from individual donors, business, and institutions who support the Foundation's mission. The OPHF is a 501 (c)3 non-profit organization and all donations are tax-deductible under IRS guidelines. The OPHF is an operating foundation and does not give grants to other foundations or institutions.

You can help save the history of ordinary Americans who did extraordinary things.

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All donations to the Old Primero Historical Foundation are tax deductible. Your donations will help make it possible to digitize and preserve interview and archival collections associated with Army Air Force veterans stationed in wartime England, and British families members who lived in the villages around the bases in East Anglia. Your tax-deductible contribution will help save these precious memories for generations of Americans and Brits who are not yet born. Help them stay connected to the World War II generation. Send in your check or donate online using the link or QR code below.

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