



Special points of interest:

- The Air War Trail in the early years for the East Anglia Air Project.
- Stories from the first oral history interviews .
- How you can be a part of the work of the Foundation

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Newsletter

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Looking Back at the Air War Trail and the Journey Thus Traveled by the East Anglia Air War Project

by Vernon L. Williams

In this issue, let's look back to the first years of my journey across East Anglia and my national travels here in the United States in search of interviews with British families who lived around the airfields and the air and ground crews stationed near their villages. The articles in this issue come from 2003 and 2004, early successes in finding the voices of those British and America who lived the history in the airwar in wartime England. Today, most of these interviewees have passed into history, but their voices live on in the future for generations to learn about those days when the fate of people everywhere was held in the balance. I wrote these words below in the fall of 2003, describing some of the early work, when most of my preservation work lay in the future.

Martin Jeffrey & 17 Interviews at Great Ellingham

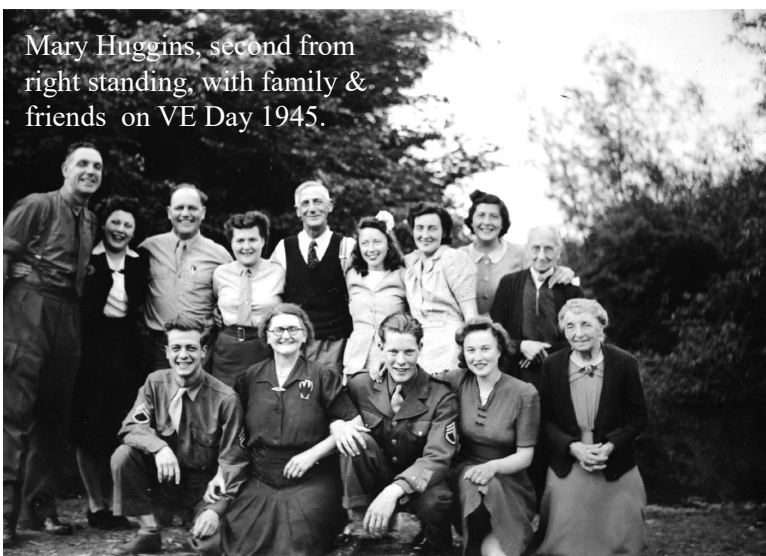
Martin Jeffrey is the UK representative for the 452nd Bomb Group and a prince of

a guy. Martin spent a day with me, touring the old base site and answering untold questions about the village and the people who lived there so long ago. The Deopham Green base was surrounded by four villages: Deopham Green, Great Ellingham, Little Ellingham, and Hingham.

I spent one other evening photographing historical photographs in Martin's home while he compiled a interview list for me. That list was the key to the most productive time I had in East Anglia. Over the course of three days, I interviewed 17

people who lived near the bases in that area. Thanks, Martin for the good work you do for the American boys from Deopham Green.

Ray and his wife Maureen Beal operate the Hill House Farm B&B on the Deopham Green Road. Maureen booked the interviews and gave me interviewing space in her dining room. Every hour or so, people showed up to tell their stories of living around the base—and what stories they were! The interviews are now a part of the historical record and the archives of the East Anglia Air War Project.



Mary Huggins, second from right standing, with family & friends on VE Day 1945.

The Coca Cola Kid



Gerry Darnell at his interview on September 3, 2003 in Rusden, England

“I used to collect the coke bottles up on the base and Tommy Schroeder called me the Coca Cola Kid.”



“We used to go up to the Red Cross Club [at Podington],” says Gerry Darnell. “I used to live up there on school holidays, sometimes three weeks at a time.” Gerry’s brother worked at the Red Cross Club and Gerry spent most of his free time there. He became a fixture at the club. “I used to collect the coke bottles up on the base and Tommy Schroeder called

me the Coca Cola kid. He made me a jacket with the Coca Cola on it which I still have.”

Gerry spent many special times at the base. His memory of those days is extraordinary. Names, dates, and events are all stored ready to retell at a moment’s notice, and his oral history interview is a treasure of stories brought to life again and again by Gerry.

“At one Christmas party for the kids, the ice cream melted so the Red Cross Director picked up the phone and spoke for a moment. Soon a truck arrived, picked up all the ice cream, and took it to the flight line. The men loaded it on a B-17 which took it up to about 20,000 where the ice cream became frozen again. The party was saved.”

Joe and Peggy Albertson at Ely, England

Joe Albertson made the most of his Army Air Corps experience. He learned a trade that led to a career, served his country, and found a wife. Now both Joe and Peggy are retired and living just north of Cambridge in Ely. Joe ended his career with the U.S. Government working in England so they settled there.

Joe was a crew chief on B-17s with the 306th Bomb Group at Thurlough. He and his crew kept the flying fortresses in the air and the missions going. Joe and other men like him are important to the story of the air war in East Anglia. The East Anglia Air War

Project is looking for more mechanics, ground crew, and base personnel to complete the story. Pass the word along.

Peggy did her part in the war as well. The daughter of a British military officer, Peggy joined the Land Army to make a difference. She and Joe met during a wartime romance, married, and lived happily ever after.

I interviewed Joe and Peggy separately on August 29, 2003 and have a video record of their wartime experiences. Their stories of home and war have added much to the story of WWII for both America and Britain.



Top: Joe and Peggy Albertson wedding day during World War II. Bottom: Peggy Albertson (center), with fellow Land Army friends in front of their hostel at Milton Earnest. EAAWP archives.

B-24 Pilot George Bledsoe in Operation Ball

George Bledsoe wasn't always a high school band director. In WWII he was a pilot in command of a B-24 crew flying single plane missions out of Leuchars, Scotland. Bledsoe's crew dropped secret agents and supplies behind enemy lines. After Operation Ball was cancelled, Bledsoe and his crew were attached to the RAF for night operations and flew for a time from Harrington Station in England.

Bledsoe and his crew arrived in England on 14 Octo-

ber 1944 as a replacement crew for a B-24 outfit near Norwich in East Anglia. Before they could fly a mission, the crew was detailed for Operation Ball at Leuchars.

Later the crew flew night bombing missions with the 92nd Bomb Group from Harrington before moving to Dijon, France where the crew resumed dropping agents behind German lines. The Bledsoe crew flew thirty missions in the ETO.

Dr. Vernon L. Williams interviewed Bledsoe on 26

February 2004 in San Antonio, Texas. Thirty-nine years before, Williams served under Bledsoe as a high school drum major. "He was a hero to all of us in high school even though we did not know of his WWII service. He was a special teacher who touched many lives."



Bledsoe Crew, left to right: (back row) Marlen M. French, bombardier; Clyde R. Sinclair, Navigator; George Bledsoe, Jr., pilot; James W. Pastella, copilot; (front row) Leonard I. Robock, radio operator; Kenneth H. Williams, waist gunner; Blaine A. Davis, gunner; William H. Alexander, engineer; John H. Franklin, gunner; George C. Raffel, dispatcher.





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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.

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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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