

The Air War Comes to a Small Essex Village:
Peter Morgan's Boyhood Memories of Shalford
Village and the Drama that Played Out There,
1943-1945

Peter Morgan

Editor's Note: I interviewed the late Peter Morgan in Chiselhampton, Marylands Green in Oxfordshire on September 5, 2003.¹ The subject of the interview centered on life in Shalford Village in County Essex during World War II. There were several airfields near Shalford, namely Wethersfield about three miles away where the 416th Bomb Group served and further away, the 381st Bomb Group based at Ridgewell to the north. The following is a transcript of that interview.

PETER MORGAN: My name is Peter Morgan. Today is the 5th of September 2003. And we are interviewing in Chiselhampton, Marylands Green, Oxfordshire.

VERNON WILLIAMS: The interviewer is Vernon L. Williams

¹Interview, Peter Morgan by Vernon L. Williams, Chiselhampton, England, September 5, 2003. East Anglia Air War Project, Old Primero Historical Foundation, Abilene, Texas.

from Abilene, Texas. Let's start off by you giving me your birth date, who your parents were, and what they did for a living.

PETER MORGAN: I was born on the 2nd of October 1935. And my father, Morris David Morgan, spent most of his life in India in the police service. My mother did teach ballet for a short while as a young woman. And she also worked in a kennels somewhere around London, and even waited on tables, I remember she was telling me. And then she met my father, married, and she became a housewife.

VERNON WILLIAMS: Tell me where you were living when the war started, and describe your home, the village, and that kind of thing, what you remember about it.

PETER MORGAN: I was living in the old vicarage in Shalford right next to the George Pub. It had been my mother's father's house, and my father bought it from his father-in-law. I used to run about in the village, summers always with bare feet. I had a dog called Jock. And I just used to spend time messing about as an early child. I had no brothers or sisters.

VERNON WILLIAMS: What's your earliest memory of the Americans arriving in your area or village?

PETER MORGAN: Hard to say quite how I remember them arriving. I do remember, there was a man across the road, his name was Ray Pasfield, and he drove a sand and gravel truck for a local company. And he actually took me, at least once, in his cab up to Wethersfield when they were building the airbase there for the war, you know, this new airstrip. And I remember it before there was a runway there. And I remember one day driving up with Ray in his cab into this forested area which later became an airbase.

VERNON WILLIAMS: What do you remember seeing?

PETER MORGAN: Lots of tractors buzzing about. I suppose they were starting with clearing and laying concrete for the airstrip, that kind of thing.

VERNON WILLIAMS: What about your home, did any of the Americans come to your home or to the village that you remember?

PETER MORGAN: Oh, yes, I remember that very well. They used to come to the George for a drink in the evenings, probably weekends maybe. And we kids would hang around saying, "Got any gum, chum?" And they'd always give you a dime or some gum or something. And they did come to our house, numbers of them, and nice people they were. They were always very relaxed, it seemed to me, easy people. And I know we had Christmases, at least one with a

serviceman there from the American Army Air Force joining in the games and having a great time. And what they used to do is, they'd bring things; they never came empty-handed to the house. They had these emergency rations with dried foods and fishing lines, so that if they landed on the water, the idea was they could inflate a rubber dingy and last for some time before they were picked up. And these emergency rations, were they called K rations?

VERNON WILLIAMS: Yes, that's the portable rations.

PETER MORGAN: So fascinating for a kid to get into these things. It was technology that didn't exist then. And I remember one guy called Monty. He took me down to the stream once, the River Pant, and we got on this bridge (laughs) and got this fishing line. And I suppose we had to tie the hook on, and whether it was from the emergency rations, emergency survival kit, I can't really remember. But anyway, down there in the water was a trout, and Monty said, "Gee, look at that, Peter, let's try and get that one." So we had this fat worm on the hook, and we lowered it down and sort of dangled it just above this trout's nose, and it took the bait. And so we yanked it up with great excitement and were reeling it in, when the darn hook fell off, and the trout fell back. So I always remember that we were both very disappointed in that one, because it was quite a little fish like that.

VERNON WILLIAMS: What are some of the other people that you remember?

PETER MORGAN: There was a very serious man called Jack Wrote, and he did write. I don't know, poetry, I think. Perhaps he was an aspiring novelist. And then there was Hayfley, he had a record collection I seem to remember. They'd bring 78 records to the house, and we'd play them and that sort of thing on a windup gramophone. And Hayfley, I seem to remember getting into the vacuum cleaner, a Hoover, which had broken down, and he was determined he was going to fix this thing for my mother. And so he took it all to bits right there on the floor and had a go to fix it, and I expect he did too.

VERNON WILLIAMS: What base were all these guys from?

PETER MORGAN: Wethersfield. And the naughtiest one was Monty, who one day, he arrived with his Army Air Force gray coat over his arm, and he said, "Sybil, I got this for you." And he went into the kitchen and took his gray coat off his arm, and there was a huge side of lamb or leg of lamb. That's the sort of thing you didn't see in the war because of rationing. My mother thought, "Wow, extraordinary." She said, "How did you get that, Monty? Where did you get that

from?” He said, “Well, I guess I hitched a ride on a British Army supplies wagon. And I sat in the back and just helped myself.” (laughter)

VERNON WILLIAMS: What did your mother think about that?

PETER MORGAN: She was gob smacked, she was so astonished to see this. What year that would’ve been, perhaps several years into the war, and you just didn’t see meat like that. And other time, someone, maybe Monty brought this sack of rice, you know, a whole sack, a gunnysack or whatever, of rice, quantities of stuff, pinched probably from somewhere, (laughs) no doubt. A real character.

VERNON WILLIAMS: Let’s talk a little bit about the crash of the *Dry Gulcher*. What do you remember about that day?

PETER MORGAN: That was a fine day. As I remember it, it must’ve been around midday, morning time. And I was, as usual, out playing. My mother’s father was staying with us. We heard this noise, that was the first thing I think I became aware of, like this aircraft in pain, engines screaming — it was a very loud noise anyway. And my grandfather looked up because he was out in the garden. And he had this habit of sort of winking, and he looked up, and he said, “Parachute practice, I see, hmm.” Anyway, I started to think something was badly wrong because of the noise and smoke that was emitting from this plane that came into view, coming I think from a westerly direction heading on an easterly but down direction, and I ran. My father had an air raid shelter built in the garden close to the house — it doesn’t exist anymore — it did for many years after the war. And I was as trained, I thought, going for the shelter. My mother, who must’ve come out of the kitchen or somewhere, grabbed me by the scruff and hurled me through the kitchen door under a table, at which point there was this God-almighty explosion, a huge bang. And I was lying under this table sort of cowering there. And I suppose sometime after that — and I couldn’t say how long — I got out into the open, and my mother must’ve gone out, and there was smoke coming up over the direction by the back of the church, and we realized this thing had blown up. And the reaction was, I took off with the dog, Jock, following me, down the path, past the house, through the churchyard, past a pond that was there, and into a field. And somewhere a ways, a little bridge that’s — there’s this concrete one there now, it was wooden then — the very bridge that Monty and I had fished for the trout on. And my mother, joined by a farm worker, Albert Tarbin from the farm, went over this bridge. And my mother said to me, “You stay there, don’t come, stay back.” So I

stopped on the edge of this field and saw my mother and Albert disappearing across the bridge into smoke; they pretty well disappeared at that point. Further on, there's a little narrow field on the other side of the stream, and a stile which you had to climb up and over, and I didn't see them do that, and I waited there. There was popping and banging going on all over the place, which later we realized was ammunition getting hot and firing off. [00:13:00] And there was this almighty bang, something blew up, and I screamed and thought that's it, mother gone, Albert gone, and I turned tail and fled back to the house with the dog in hot pursuit. And I got back to the house, went to go in the kitchen, and I thought that's very strange — I never saw a house where it was raining inside the house. There was water coming from the ceiling all over like rain, honestly it was just raining in the kitchen. And what had happened was, the shock of the original explosion when the plane blew up above ground had ruptured the tank that held water, [00:14:00] which must have had 500, 1,000 gallons in it, whatever. And the whole lot had come cascading down through the floor, down onto the bathroom floor, and then through that in the kitchen below. And it was an old tank, very rusty, and the concussion had ruptured it. Years later, I removed that tank myself. So that was that day.

VERNON WILLIAMS: What happened next?

PETER MORGAN: Oh, yes, and I do remember at one point, possibly before taking off down to see what had happened beyond the church, there was a bit of a smoking generator that had plowed into the lawn just by the house, a piece about that big, hot. And it had made a furrow in the grass lawn, and there it sat half-buried in the ground. It was a very incredible thing to see when you're nine years old, and very immediate to bring home what war was, what was going on. Amazing.

VERNON WILLIAMS: What about your mother?

PETER MORGAN: She came back, and a great relief. And she later told, possibly that day, how she'd been looking around to see if there was anybody that needed pulling out of the wreckage. That's why they'd gone in there. And she told how she found a satchel, it turned out to be one of the crew's satchels that he carried stuff in. But she said, "I opened it, and something oozed out," and she thought "oh my god, brains," was how she put it, she thought it was part of a human being. And then suddenly, she realized somehow that it was melting chocolate. Just a little detail like that. And of course, when everything cooled down later that day, I was in there looking and picking over

hundreds of bits of stuff, very gingerly. I mean when the smoke had cleared, you looked to see if there was anything like a bomb. Lots of ammo, belts of machine gun bullets probably from the waist gun or wherever, lying about in heaps. It was incredible. And I think the harvest had been cut, it was sewn with barley or some cereal crop, and so the stubble had caught alight, so there was quite a fire going at one point. And the bits of aircraft were scattered far and wide, as you probably know about that. I remember seeing from a bus, you know, they had these double-decker buses in the area in those days, they don't now. And sitting up there, you could see sitting in a cornfield, the wing of this plane quite clearly, some way off, a mile or whatever, so bits went everywhere.

VERNON WILLIAMS: Could you see any color on that wing?

PETER MORGAN: Yes, I remember seeing the star, you know, the insignia of the Army Air Force, and some sort of yellow somewhere, I can't really remember what it was, whether the underside of the wing was yellow or something like that.

VERNON WILLIAMS: What about the crew that bailed out, did you see any of them?

PETER MORGAN: Oh, yes, I remember very clearly about this. It was probably that afternoon — I think they call them command cars — I'm not clear whether it was an open-sided vehicle — a sort of predecessor to the Humvee, or something like that. Anyway, there were American ambulance personnel, and they had parked down by the Shalford Hall just opposite the house, pretty much. And I remember two guys there in fatigues with their caps on, and I remember the dialogue. I remember one guy saying to the other, "Well, we found his body, but we can't find his head." I remember that, I can hear it, the man saying this. And so for this nine-year-old, forever after when I was picking blackberries in summers or fishing in the river, I had this sort of strange fantasy — it wasn't a fear so much, a sort of fascination maybe, that I was going to find this whitened skull staring at me from the bottom of the river or out of a blackberry bush. I really did. And it's very nice to lay that ghost to rest, really. I don't know that anything ever was found about that, but that's what they said. And I imagine that the tail gunner didn't manage to get out, or if his chute caught on the tail, which I heard. I don't think I ever saw him going down or anything like that, nothing dramatic like that, so dragged down. But the force of the explosion must've decapitated him, sad to say. It had a big effect on me.

VERNON WILLIAMS: What did you hear about Albert Tarbin's efforts to reach the wreckage? I think he was cited for bravery or something.

PETER MORGAN: I didn't ever hear anything about that. All I know is that my mother was there. And I think — I don't know what Peggy Goodchild told you, but I heard that Pleasance, her sister might've been involved. But my thinking is, they would've been at Hoffman's Ball Bearing Factory that day working.

VERNON WILLIAMS: Pleasance's husband was away at war, and Peggy was away at work. But Pleasance was down there with your mother and Albert?

PETER MORGAN: Yes, that's right.

VERNON WILLIAMS: But she is in a nursing home and is having a problem with memory and recognizing people, the onset I think of Alzheimer's. So I didn't get to speak to her.

PETER MORGAN: No, she wouldn't, probably not. Well, I don't know, but what I've heard, she wouldn't be lucid, sad.

VERNON WILLIAMS: Did you ever see any other men who bailed out?

PETER MORGAN: There's a downslope, as you probably know, having just visited there, down from the village road, down to the farm. And I seem to remember a guy in flying gear hobbling down, because one broke or sprained his ankle, at least. And they walked in from everywhere, through cornfields and wherever they landed. And I think the ambulance or this open truck had picked up one or two of them. I have sort of a vague memory of one or two guys sitting in the back of this thing when they were looking and talking about the unfortunate tail gunner, who turns out to be your uncle — so strange, so incredible. Because you know, you live through this thing, and you think who the heck was that guy, what about him? What did he feel as he went down and all that?

VERNON WILLIAMS: What else can you remember about that day? What about the debris and the authorities coming to take it away?

PETER MORGAN: No, I don't really remember too much anything of that actually. As a matter of fact, just that a year or two later, it could have been as much as that, the house had this wall garden which is there today, the wall is still there, as you probably — did you notice it? My mother used to play tennis with Peggy and Pleasance and others on that — there was a tennis lawn in those days. And while they were playing tennis, if I was home on summer holiday, I would go with

the dog and sort of mess about down in the wall garden, which was pretty wild. There were pear trees, hazelnut trees, plum trees, and things like that. And this particular occasion, we were looking for rabbits because they were in there. And I was saying to the dog, which was Beth — so it was sometime after the crash a year or two, because we didn't get Beth until after the war. And she was a grown dog, so it could've been as much as two or three years after the crash. And so I was saying, "Fetch, find the rabbits," and this sort of thing, and the dog was scrabbling about. And then I was wandering about, and I suddenly saw something in the long grass under a tree, and I thought what's that? And I went over, and I thought it's part of that aircraft. Is it, is it a bomb? So I very gingerly approached it, not knowing what it was at all. And I looked around it, and there was an object about that big, and I saw it had a gash in it. And then I read "breathing oxygen" on one part of it at one end, and I thought right, that's harmless. So I grabbed it and staggered home with it right away, and nobody challenged me, nobody saw me because there was nobody around that day, luckily. And it was my trophy, and it's right there behind that screen now.

VERNON WILLIAMS: What did your mother say about you dragging that home?

PETER MORGAN: She probably wasn't around. And she said, "Where did you get that?" And I said, "I found it in the Goodchild's garden." And I suppose my mother said, "Well, it's theirs then." But I suppose they said, "Oh, let Peter keep it, he found it." And I was very happy to do that. I was so proud of that thing, you know, to find that.

VERNON WILLIAMS: That's the biggest piece that you ever found.

PETER MORGAN: Yes. I don't know what happened to the generator, I mean I must have kept that. At one time, my father, he retired from India just before the Second World War started, and he got a job through connections only in the military police. And he was in something to do with security at local bases at the start of the war. And so he was officious about bits and very boring about that. Like I think Monty's sack of rice, my mother complaining to my father who said, "You have to turn that in, you can't keep that. That's illegal, it's not allowed." So he was very pompous and officious like that, I suppose he saw it as doing his job. And so those trophies went, but whether he collected the generator and did the same sort of thing with that. But I don't think he could've because he never worried about that. In fact, the oxygen cylinder spent years lying in the garden. And in about 1970

— you may have noticed this ring — I don't know whether it would show on film, or you may have spotted it.

VERNON WILLIAMS: Hold it up in front of your face.

PETER MORGAN: That ring is part of that cylinder, I made it myself. I cut a piece out where the gash was, which had been a bit of shrapnel that must've hit the tank at the time of the explosion, and I fashioned that ring. And there it is, that's part of *Dry Gulcher*, and I've worn that ever since.

VERNON WILLIAMS: Can you think of anything else that you can remember that has to do with the crash of the *Dry Gulcher* or the people of the village or anything?

PETER MORGAN: I can't say honestly that I do. I'm sure as soon as we stop running the film, I shall think of a number of things, that's the way it is, but no, not particularly. You have to remember that it was one episode in quite a number in the war that kids like myself went through in that village. I mean other bits appeared, for example, what they used to call chaff, to fool radar which was dropped by enemy aircraft. And you'd go out in the mornings, and on the power lines and telephone wires would be hanging this silver and black strip, in festoons, I remember it one day. Then another time early in the war, across the road, Ray Pasfield's house was hit by an incendiary, a little bomb with fins with phosphorous in it, that big. And it went straight through the wash house roof and landed on the floor, and luckily for them didn't explode. I remember seeing that. One day, I was out in the garden about it would've been '44 or '43, maybe even '45 early – no, because it was not cold, so it was a warm season, so maybe '44, the same year as *Dry Gulcher*, I suddenly heard this sound coming from the east. It sounded like a motorcycle without a muffler, and this incredible noise. And then I saw this thing low, it skimmed right over the house going (sound) like that, and it just flashed by at a speed one had never seen before. And it was a V-1 pilotless missile heading towards London or somewhere in the west.

VERNON WILLIAMS: What they called a doodlebug?

PETER MORGAN: Doodlebug, exactly. I remember it, right over the roof, a great stream of fire coming out the back, and then it disappeared. And I don't remember, I don't think it came down anywhere near us, it just disappeared into the distance. So things like that were always. And when I was at school in Shalford, we clearly had this vinyl, or whatever it was, American cloth chart with colorful pictures. And it said at the top, "Do not touch these or pick up these

objects.” And there were things like fountain pens, ink bottles, toys, all itemized in little sets in this chart. And these were said to be dropped by the Germans precisely to maim and injure the civilian population, that was the idea of them. And I’ve been told that the allies did the same, so it was sort of a nasty aspect of war. But we were conditioned, hence my caution when I approached the oxygen cylinder.

VERNON WILLIAMS: What about the end of the war? What do you remember about the Americans going away, suddenly not in your home, and all of that?

PETER MORGAN: I don’t really remember that, except that I would’ve been, no doubt, sad not to see familiar faces. And maybe they came in and said goodbye. And I do remember they had the tricycle undercarriage plane known as the Marauder. And they were notorious planes to fly because they were nose-heavy. And they were frequently coming back from missions, and they were difficult to land, especially if the bomb wouldn’t unstick on the raid and got jammed. I think there was one incident where a friend of ours had to fly this thing and land with the bomb still undropped. And they had to come in and very gingerly put this thing down with this bomb. I suppose there was no way of knowing if the fuse had been set, or perhaps it would. It was just a hazardous thing. And I do remember one time, there were Polish airmen at a base at Saling, and they flew P-51 Mustangs, of which I was given the Perspex or Plexiglas model early on, a beautiful model by one of the American airmen. He just gave it to me.

VERNON WILLIAMS: Do you still have it?

PETER MORGAN: I don’t. I was too young, and instead of sitting it nicely on the piano or the table, guess what? I tried to fly the thing, so it suffered a bit. (laughs) The propeller even moved around. But anyway, I was taken out one day to this Polish airbase just a stone’s throw from where I lived in Shalford, Saling is. And I was allowed to sit in the cockpit in the hangar where this plane was probably being serviced. And a Polish guy we knew said, “Peter, don’t touch red button on joystick. That’s all, just don’t touch it.” (laughs) You know why. (laughter) But perhaps he was just being funny because I’m sure it wasn’t armed or ready to go off in a hangar, but who knows with the Poles. (laughter) They’re very keen to get back at the Germans, of course.

VERNON WILLIAMS: And what do you think about the impact of all these Americans in your village, for example, on the relationship

between the British people and the Americans?

PETER MORGAN: My personal view of it is wonderful. I didn't know one who wasn't really nice. And I do remember them, I mean I remember Monty. And I remember the serious face of Jack Wrote, a rather wistful-looking man. Just wonderful. I mean for a kid, the frightening experience of the war, there were terrifying aspects of it. For example, my mother would go out — perhaps she was working at the base — I was billeted for that night — it must have been fairly early in the war, I suppose, '42, '43 — over the road at the Critole's house, Page's. And they had a nanny to look after their two children then, Francis and Harriet — Francis was the boy, and Harriet was the oldest. And we slept in the nursery, three beds, that particular night. And a raid was on, and these bombers were high overhead in the middle of the night. And they were German, they weren't ours, because you could tell by the sort of drone of the engine, it had a certain pattern to it that one got to know. And anyway, Harriet, who was a very highly-strung little girl — she'd have been about six then, I suppose — started to scream. And she screamed, and she screamed with sheer hysterical fright just hearing these planes. And I don't know how they calmed her down in the end, but we were all sort of — Francis and I sort of sitting tight, lying tight in our beds. I do remember that night very clearly, that happening.

VERNON WILLIAMS: What do you think about the relationship between the British people and the American people today and all the years between World War II and —

PETER MORGAN: Well, I can tell you personally. I feel terribly betrayed. I felt wholly delight and admiration for those guys who came over during World War II. But since then, I've become very disillusioned about it, I have to say. I mean I have to be frank with you, Vernon, I just don't like the sort of things that Bush and Co. Do. But I discriminate, I mean you've got the administration, and you've got the people, you know. And so it's not the people, but it's the misguided way this business of Iraq has been conducted. Saddam is a horror, but look who put him there. And Blair sort of following Bush's lead and lying, as it's turning out in this Hutton inquiry. I mean it's horrible. I really feel demoralized and disgusted by what has gone on. I said at the time, before they launched this war, the American administration has got to be stopped now, or it'll be too late forever. This far and no further, it must not happen. And unfortunately it did, and we can all see the result. And I've been an active — I was anti-nuclear, I didn't

approve having American cruise missiles and all the rest of it. I was in many demonstrations, CND and the like, [00:39:00] and I've been active in that way.

VERNON WILLIAMS: Any final thoughts on anything you've talked about, any memories, any additions?

PETER MORGAN: I loved the Americans, they were really nice. And my feelings about that time will never change. And I have a fondness for American people that has obviously come out of that time, really. But as to politics, that's another story.

VERNON WILLIAMS: Well thank you very much.

PETER MORGAN: Thank you.

Editor's Note: At this point the interview concluded, and Peter Morgan led me to another room to show me an oxygen tank from the B-17, the Dry Gulcher. Here are images of Peter Morgan and other images related to his World War II experience at Shalford, Village.



Peter Morgan, September 5, 2003



The oxygen tank from the B-17 Dry Gulcher, which crashed at Shalford Village on August 4, 1944.



Peter Morgan, his mother, Sybil and his dog Jock, circa 1944-1947.

*EAST ANGLIA AIR WAR ARCHIVES &
THE SHALFORD HISTORY COMMITTEE*



*LARGEST SURVIVING PIECES OF THE DRY GULCHER
(THE "E" WAS PART OF THE 532ND SQUADRON
MARKING NEAR THE WAIST GUN POSITION)*

*EAST ANGLIA AIR WAR ARCHIVES &
THE SHALFORD HISTORY COMMITTEE*



*SHALFORD HALL DAMAGE RESULTING FROM THE
CRASH OF THE DRY GULCHER FLYING FORTRESS*



The George Cupernall crew—Front row, left to right: George Cupernall, pilot; Frank Scurlock, co-pilot (not flying); James W. Sneed, Jr., navigator; Charles W. Young, bombardier. Back row, left to right: Earl T. Yankton, top turret gunner/engineer; Orby K. Putman, ball turret gunner (not flying); Frank Heinze, radioman; Harold F. Norris, tail gunner (killed); Aubbrey V. Diamonte, waist gunner not flying; Loren W. Murphy, waist gunner.

There were three additional crew aboard the Dry Gulcher: Irving Moore, co-pilot/deputy mission lead; Russell Hadley, radar navigator; Francis G. Hawkins, waist gunner/photographer.