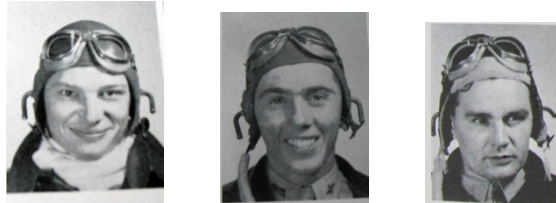


Fifty Years Later (1942-1992)

By: Ed. Davidson

Three aviation cadets, Class of 43-C, shown below, started our training together in June of 1942 and are now preparing to attend Fred Kennie's 95th Bomb Group reunion that will be held in England in May 1992.



Ed Davidson – Fred Kennie – Jim Bellingham



May 21, 1992
Davidson - Kennie - Bellingham
Hitler's "Eagles Nest"

We had set some goals for the trip in addition to attending the reunion:

- Visit the 95th and 96th Bomb Group bases where Fred and I served in England
- Visit the Breitling farm and the Vortman family to revisit Fred's capture by the Germans..
- Return to the Stalag Luft I POW camp site at Barth, Germany
- Visit the Austrian/Swiss area where Jim was flying before he was shot down.

We traveled overseas separately. I arrived at the Gatwick Airport in England on the 5th of May 1992 and then traveled to the Forum Hotel in London, the rendezvous point for the reunion. The next day I walked from the hotel to visit Piccadilly Circus. This is my first time back there since June of 1945. Fred Kennie had arrived today and I met him as I returned to the hotel. Since Jim Bellingham had flown from bases in Africa and Italy, we planned to meet him in Amsterdam later on in the trip. Fred and I had an early dinner at the Polish Officers Club and then joined the other 150 people who were attending the 95th BG organizational meeting.

May 7th the tour group left the hotel in three buses that were headed for the Imperial War Museum at Duxford. This is Europe's top aviation museum with over 120 historic aircraft on display. Many are flight worthy and regularly take to the sky over Duxford. The 120 aircraft include the main U.S. combat planes of World War II as well as the more current 8th Air Force equipment on display.

They plan to commence construction of the American Air Museum this year (1992).



American Air Museum
June 2, 1997
Fred Kennie at Duxford

The museum will include many American planes, educational displays, military equipment, archival research material and special exhibitions on Anglo-American cooperation.

Leaving Duxford at 1415 hours we traveled to the Cambridge American Military Cemetery and Memorial in Cambridge.

The Cambridge American Cemetery and Memorial is one of 14 permanent American WWII Cemetery/Memorials erected on foreign soil by the American Battle Monuments Commission. It was established as a temporary military cemetery in 1943 on land that was donated by the University of Cambridge and then was selected later as the only permanent WW II military cemetery in the British Isles.



View of part of the Cambridge Memorial Cemetery

Three thousand eight hundred and twelve American war dead are buried here and five thousand one hundred and twenty six American missing in action, that were lost or buried at sea, are listed by name on the Wall of the Missing. Three thousand five hundred twenty four of the missing are veterans of the U.S. Air Force. The head stones are laid out in a fan shaped arrangement sweeping across beautifully maintained grounds covering an area of 30.5 acres. There also is a museum structure laid out to depict a large room and a small devotional Chapel. The names of the missing are engraved on the 472 foot long Wall of the Missing that leads up to the Memorial.

It was here on the Wall of the Missing that I found the names of my missing crewmembers. The five are shown (The faces of my crewmembers have been placed on the photos of the stones).



One of the outstanding features of the museum is an impressive map that indicates the principal sea routes across the Atlantic and the types of naval and commercial craft which bore the men and munitions to Europe from the U.S. There is also a listing of the continuous air assaults by the U.S. and Royal Air Force (RAF) over Europe and a depiction of the aircraft which took part in the

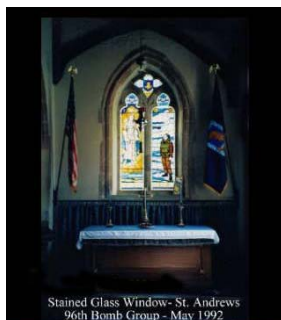
anti-submarine campaign. In recognition of the 95th Bomb Group reunion a memorial service was held for the crewmembers of the last B-17 from the 95th lost to enemy action during WWII. The plane was hit by flak while returning from a 'Chow Hound' mission and crashed in the English Channel with the loss of most of the crew members. A lone B-25 with invasion stripes on the wings and fuselage did a fly over to commemorate the event. When the ceremony ended the tour group headed for Horham, home of the 95th during WWII. Fred and I were met in Horham by our gracious hosts with whom we would be staying. Bridget, Michael and daughter, Louise Lewer.



They took us to their cottage which is located about 150 feet south of hardstand #143 at the old 95th BG airbase in Horham and made us feel as if we were part of the family.

Today is V.E. Day (8 May) and we begin our activities at Horham. The plans include dedicating the replacement of the Horham Church eight-bells and a visit to the remains of the 95th Bomb Group base. About 1000 feet of the runway is all that remains of the old base site prompting us to pay a visit to the 'Red Feather Club' that is destined to be the museum for the 95th Bomb Group in Horham.

We then traveled about 25 kilometers (15 miles) to Snetterton Heath, home of the 96th Bomb Group. Our first stop was at the church at Quidenham to view the stained glass window, plaque, flags, and furniture that were donated by members of the 96th BG 1944 to honor those who gave their lives. Then on to the Memorial Museum at Eccles Hall School. The museum is housed in a Nissan hut on land that is part of the School. The Nissan hut served as the morgue during the war.



The stained glass window along with a mind's eye view of the window overlooking the lost souls in the Cambridge Cemetery plus the museum that was the repository for many prior to their final trip from Snetterton Heath.

The museum offers much insight into life on the old base through books, photographs, videos and various authentic artifacts including both clothing and equipment that were used by the various people stationed at Snetterton Heath. The museum is well maintained and staffed by helpful volunteers. Listed on the mission board are the training bases and the operational bases of the 96th Bomb Group in addition to all the combat missions flown by the 96th. I photographed that portion of the board that listed my seven missions and then from the book "Snetterton Falcons" (96BG history) I read about my crew and the happenings on January 5, 1944.

January 5, 1944 – At approximately 3 AM my crew was awakened by the Charge of Quarters, and told to report for briefing. The weather was cold and dreary as usual. After a hurried breakfast of powdered eggs, toast and scalding hot tea, we reported for briefing. The main bomber stream was sent over northern Germany; the target for the 96th Bomb Group was the airdrome at Bordeaux, France. The first 96th Bomb Group B-17 to depart that morning was lost when the airplane failed to remain airborne after takeoff. The remainder of the group assembled over various "bunchers"(radio beacons) and departed south across the English Channel with our fighter escort. Soon after crossing the north coast of the Brest Peninsula our fighter escort turned away to return to their base. The Group continued without interference to Bordeaux. Over the target "Little Girls" received minor flak damage, but the squadron leader took much heavier hits. As we turned right after bomb release the Squadron fell behind the rest of the Group. We were over the Bay of Biscay, turning north and heading home when we came under attack by a swarm of ME-109s. During the fourth attack by the German ME-109s "Little Girls" was badly damaged; my copilot, Lt. Bud Trubey, seated right next to me was killed, number three engine was on fire and soon dropped off the burning right wing and number four engine had stopped running. There was fire in the cockpit and all of the plane's communications were inoperable. The shoreline was visible off the right side and I started a turn toward land. Lt. Johnny Johnston, the navigator, went aft to alert the gunners that we would bailout after we reached the shore. Johnny soon returned with word that the four gunners in the back had already left the burning airplane. I soon realized that we were not going to make the shoreline and the crew was alerted for ditching. We had a smooth touchdown!

After the airplane came to rest on the water, I left the cockpit by the side window, climbed to the top of the fuselage and walked aft to where the rest of the crew were inflating the life rafts. Johnny and I returned to the cockpit, but were unable to extricate the body of the copilot. We returned to the life rafts, tied the two together, and climbed aboard. (I still had not gotten my feet wet.) "Little Girls" floated for about ten minutes before sinking beneath the waters of the Bay of Biscay. After about four and a half hours of paddling towards shore in our life rafts we saw a flying boat approaching. The crew made several passes over us then landed beside us. We were greeted with the words "For you the war is over!". We were taken to a hospital in Bordeaux where we spent the night. During the evening a young German pilot came to confirm that I was one of his four victims that day. He reported that he had been shot down by my tail gunner and that he too had been rescued from the Bay. My gunners who bailed out were never recovered and presumably drowned.

The report back home at the 96th Bomb Group was: "FIVE PARACHUTES WERE SEEN BEFORE THE AIRPLANE EXPLODED – NO OTHER SURVIVORS".

We then looked around the old base where only one or two buildings remain, along with part of two runways that now serve as a section of an auto race course.

It was cloudy and cold as we returned to Horham and prepared to attend a 'Medieval Dinner' at Framlingham College. Each dinner guest was presented with a mug for their "mead" and a crown or other head piece to wear during dinner. The mead was good, the roast beef dinner was well prepared and the service was quite efficient. There were about 200 people in attendance and they were welcomed by the late Mr. Roger Freeman, the noted historian and author of many books on the Eighth Air Force. Several other dignitaries made speeches welcoming us to the 50th anniversary of the Eighth Air Force in England (1942 to 1992).

Saturday (9 May) it was rainy and cold. We left by bus to visit the 'Bloody' 100th and the 390th Bomb Group museums. The first stop was at Thorpe Abbots, where the 100th Memorial Museum is housed in their original control tower. The items on display include a fine collection of uniforms, photographs, medals, personal documents plus the tower itself. We also visited the Chapel of Remembrance and other buildings containing numerous other exhibits. Then we bussed over to the 390th Memorial Museum at Parham airfield, RAF Framlingham. There the control tower had been restored and was filled with aviation memorabilia that had been a part of the RAF and the Eighth Air Force. Adjacent to the control tower is a Nissan hut built from original components. It was my great pleasure to get to talk with Mr. Ian Hawkins. Ian is the author of many books, some of which are "B-17's over Berlin", "Personal Stories from the 95th Bomb Group", "The Munster Raid" and "Bloody Skies over Germany" among others.

Upon our return to Horham the Lewers' son, Will, had arrived from London. As a boy he used to scour the old airfield area, after the fields were plowed, and recovered many 50 caliber brass shell casings. He showed us his basketful and offered Fred and me as many as we wanted. Now my two grandsons Joseph Fletcher and Lee Douglass Davidson each have a souvenir of my part in WWII. Before we retired for the evening I presented the Lewer family with my 95th B.G. shoulder bag, the mead mug from the Medieval dinner and a 50th anniversary coffee cup from the 390th B.G. museum.

Sunday was a 'beautiful' English day, rainy, cold and dreary. After attending service in the Horham church and a buffet luncheon we said our farewell to the great people of Horham. Our next stop was at the Cathedral at Bury St Edmunds. Here the 'official' welcome to the 8th Air Force members who had returned to England was offered. The dedicatory speech was delivered by Prince Andrew. The special welcome service also included a fly past and a street parade that included a full RAF band.

Bridget Lewer accompanied Fred and me to the Memorial Services and stood with us in the rain during the parade and fly-past. The first aircraft over were some 111's and Tornado Jets, followed shortly by the B-17 'Sally B' from Duxford, escorted by a Spitfire on the right and a Mustang on the left.



Spitfire - "Sally B" (B-17) - P-51
May 10, 1992

After the Commemorative Services we drove to the Lewers' London home for tea and our farewell to good friends. Fred and I took the underground back to the Forum hotel. I awoke today with a sore throat and a cold, however, I still made the trip today to the RAF Museum in Hendon. This is Britain's museum of Aviation. It has a Spitfire and a Hurricane, mounted on pedestals, near the main entrance and has over 70 famous aircraft, each with its own flying story. There are many scenes depicting British Aviation History including the 'Battle of Britain'. Some other areas of interest were the Bomber Command section and the USAAF exhibit which has a B-17G, a B-25J and a P-51. There are also a Crew Room and War Memorial. In the afternoon we visited the Underground Headquarters that was built to protect Sir Winston Churchill and his war cabinet against hostile attacks. We also saw the transatlantic telephone room from which Churchill could speak directly with President Roosevelt in the White House. The Headquarters is located nearby to the House of Commons and Westminster Abbey so we got to view them along with Big Ben, Ten Downing Street, Tower Bridge, Buckingham Palace and The Tower of London as we toured London by bus.

Tuesday the twelfth Fred and I said good-bye to the 95th tour group and headed to Heathrow for a flight to Amsterdam to start our own tour. We met Jim Bellingham at the airport in Amsterdam, picked up our rental car and drove to Arnhem, Netherlands. Here we met friends of Fred, Kees and Margo Sonneveld who were splendid hosts. They had arranged for dinner and a hotel for the night. Wednesday 13 May (47 years ago today we left Stalag Luft I) Margo picked us up at the hotel and we visited the Airborne Museum. The Museum covers four floors and has a comprehensive display of uniforms, equipment, maps, battle plans and photographs. We also visited the cemetery where many of the airborne troopers are laid to rest. We traveled through the downtown area that has been rebuilt since the war and we got to see 'A Bridge Too Far' of movie fame. On my return home I watched the movie and many of the places were familiar.

We left Arnhem for Enschede, Netherlands to meet with Mr. Edo van der Laan. Edo has spent tremendous time and effort tracing aircraft and crews from WW II. And is an authority of note on this subject. I was confined to the hotel with a very bad cold on Thursday, but Fred and Jim enjoyed a

very special day. They first visited with the family of Joseph Bertling on whose farm Fred's plane had crashed, during its seventh mission, after being shot down by a German pilot. It was thought that the German pilot Gerd Wiengard in his FW 190 was the one who downed the plane (Patsy Ann III) just after she dropped her bombs on Munster, Germany. Farmer Josef Bertling still finds material from the crashed bomber every year after spring plowing. Willie Riegetrt, Peter Ebert and Jochem Eickhof of the Missing Soldier Tracking Group were alerted of our upcoming visit. The group searched specifically for remains of "Patsy Ann III" and they did find one propeller and one of the instruments from the cockpit. Fred accepted the instrument and was also given two embroidered table cloths. The table cloths were made from parachute material by a now 85 year old woman. She was given the parachutes by Fred's other crewmembers in exchange for a meal. Five crew members were killed prior to or during the crash and the other five bailed out. Fred pulled his parachute string just prior to hitting the ground and managed to escape. The other four were taken prisoner. Fred had bailed out and landed in Germany. Hiding by day and traveling west toward Holland at night he crossed the border into Eibergen and on to the Vortman family farm where he hid in a haystack. He was soon discovered by the Vortman's dog and some small children had spotted him also. Since other allied troops were already hiding within the Vortman house Fred had to be turned over to the authorities in order to save the others. Anton Vortman's mother asked Fred in 1943, to leave a photograph and his address as he was leaving. Fred decided that doing so would be far too dangerous so instead he gave the farmer his watch. My cold was somewhat better today and I did not want to miss another day of excitement. **This was to be Fred's visit back to the Vortman family farm. During the visit, Anton Vortman, only a kid in 1943, presented the watch still running back to Fred forty-nine years later. This was quite a unique event.** After the excitement of the day we stopped at Edo's residence for refreshments, to meet his family and to express our gratitude for his efforts. They all joined us at the Park hotel for a farewell dinner.

Saturday 16 May we left Enschede and crossed into Germany on our way to Stalag Luft I. We arrived in the Village of Barth early in the day on May 17th and our first stop was the train station.



We remembered disembarking from the train there and being marched past the church, through the archway over the street and then along the street in a west-northwest direction to the POW camp site. We retraced this route again, but this time we drove, stopping several times to look back at the church steeple to get our bearings. When we observed the proper perspective of the church we knew that we were close to the old camp.

Sure enough, about 100 feet ahead on the west side of this road was the place where the campsite had been. The only thing that would suggest a POW camp had existed here is a plaque attached to a concrete block in a small well maintained park.

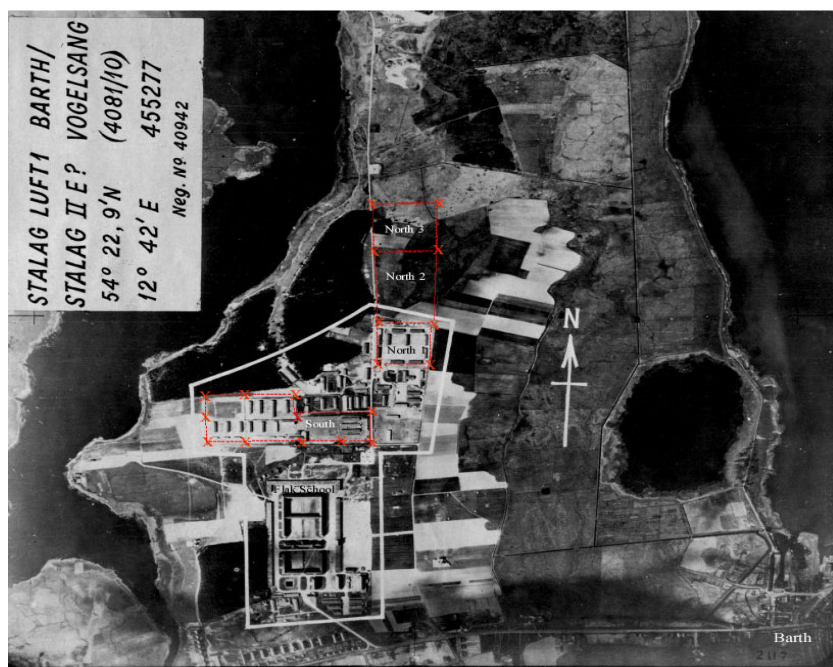


Ed Davidson & Jim Bellingham



The church in Barth that we remembered from the days when we were POWs and the original Stalag Luft One memorial plaque with these words:

“Here liberated by the Soviet Army in May 1945 Prisoners of War of the USA and Great Britain”



P-38 Photo recon of our POW camp. We were in the South Compound.



"This plaque is dedicated by the citizens of Barth and the Royal Air Force Ex-P.O.W. Association on 28 September, 1996, to commemorate all those held prisoner at Stalag Luft 1, sited here from July, 1940, to May, 1945: members of the British Commonwealth and United States of America Air Forces and their allies from the occupied countries and the Soviet Union. Nothing has been forgotten." (Our thanks to Jeff Blyth) (Replaced 1992 memorial).

We continued north along the roadway past the areas where the north compounds had been located all the way to the water's edge. There we looked east towards the area of the rocket test site at Peenemunde. We recalled watching the contrails of Hitler's A-4 rockets being tested. These rockets were later designated the V-2 which rained down on England causing great destruction. We retraced our path back past the campsite and flak school as we bid farewell to Barth. On the way south we stopped at a location where we remembered a slave labor (concentration) camp had been. Another memorial is located there.



At the entrance is a brick wall with the words 'Mahnmal Barth' with a triangular symbol, point down. In the park there are eight plaques laid on concrete and eight plaques on a wall in eight different languages commemorating those who died there.

Our last stop was at the same airfield where we boarded B-17's for the flight from Stalag Luft 1 to Camp Lucky Strike on May 13th 1945.



We then left this area and headed for Munich to meet with my son, Bob, who has worked in Munich since 1987. Bob moved into our hotel temporarily to serve as our tour guide. Wednesday the 20th we toured the city and climbed the sixteen stories to the observation deck of the Alter Peter church which is right across the street from the building containing the 'Glockenspiel'.



Ed & Robert Davidson
Munich 19 May 1992

During the afternoon Fred went to visit with Gerd Wiegand, the German pilot who was thought to have shot him down. It turned out that Gerd had shot down 'The Brown Mule' flying on the other side of the formation. I had lunch with Bob and his lady friend while Jim spent the afternoon walking and photographing much of the city.

Jim Bellingham also reminisced about his seventh mission which was to Augsburg, Germany to destroy the ball bearing factory. (December 19, 1943)

"The group took off from Foggia, Italy for the first bomb run over Germany from the south. Just after releasing our bombs and turning off target a burst of flak took off the Plexiglas nose of our plane and injured the bombardier. The increased drag reduced our airspeed and we rapidly fell behind the formation. We were attacked by a formation of ME-109's and a fire started in the right wing prior to some P-38's arriving to drive off the German planes. I was unable to extinguish the fire so it seemed prudent to bail out before it reached the gas tanks. At 17000 feet I ordered the crew to bail out and open their chutes as quickly as possible since I was not certain that we were clear of the Alps. All of the crewmembers cleared the plane safely; however, the radio operator was shot and killed as he floated down in his parachute. The bombardier and I landed close together in a vineyard near the town of Mortegliano. The bombardier was transported to a hospital in Udine; I was marched to a nearby armory and then went by train to Dulag Luft and eventually to Stalag Luft I."

Thursday 21 May we left Munich for the Eagles Nest near Berchtesgaden, Germany. Upon arrival we walked through a tunnel which had been blasted out of solid rock and then rode the elevator up to the 'Eagles Nest', a veritable fortress.



We left Berchtesgaden and took a route into Austria that took us through Waidring, Innsbruck, and St. Anton where we entered the Arlberg tunnel which is 12 kilometers (7.5 miles) in length. We crossed the border into Switzerland and on the 23 of May we said our goodbyes to Bob at the train station in Zurich for his return to Munich. We reentered Germany where I dropped Jim and Fred off at Ramstein AFB for their return to the states and I drove to the airport in Frankfurt. My companions and I had driven 2846 kilometers, accomplished our goals and met many wonderful people especially our hosts and good friends. Thanks again to all of you who made our trip so successful.

Michael, Bridget and Louise Lewer - White House Cottage, Horham, Suffolk, England

Kees and Margo Sonneveld – Eduard Van Beinumlaan 7, 6815 GC, Arnhem, Nederland

Edo, Lidy and Saskiya van der Laan- Poortbultenhoek 53, 7546 CT, Enschede, Nederland

Michael, Bridget, and Louise Lewer visited us in San Diego, CA in 1993 and 1995. Fred and I were invited to come back to England to visit them at their home in London. They also offered us unrestricted use of their cottage in Horham and use of one of their automobiles. Fred and I were most happy for their generous offer and enjoyed another three weeks in England in May 1997.

Ed Davidson in San Diego, CA [edavids1@san.rr.com]

September 2013