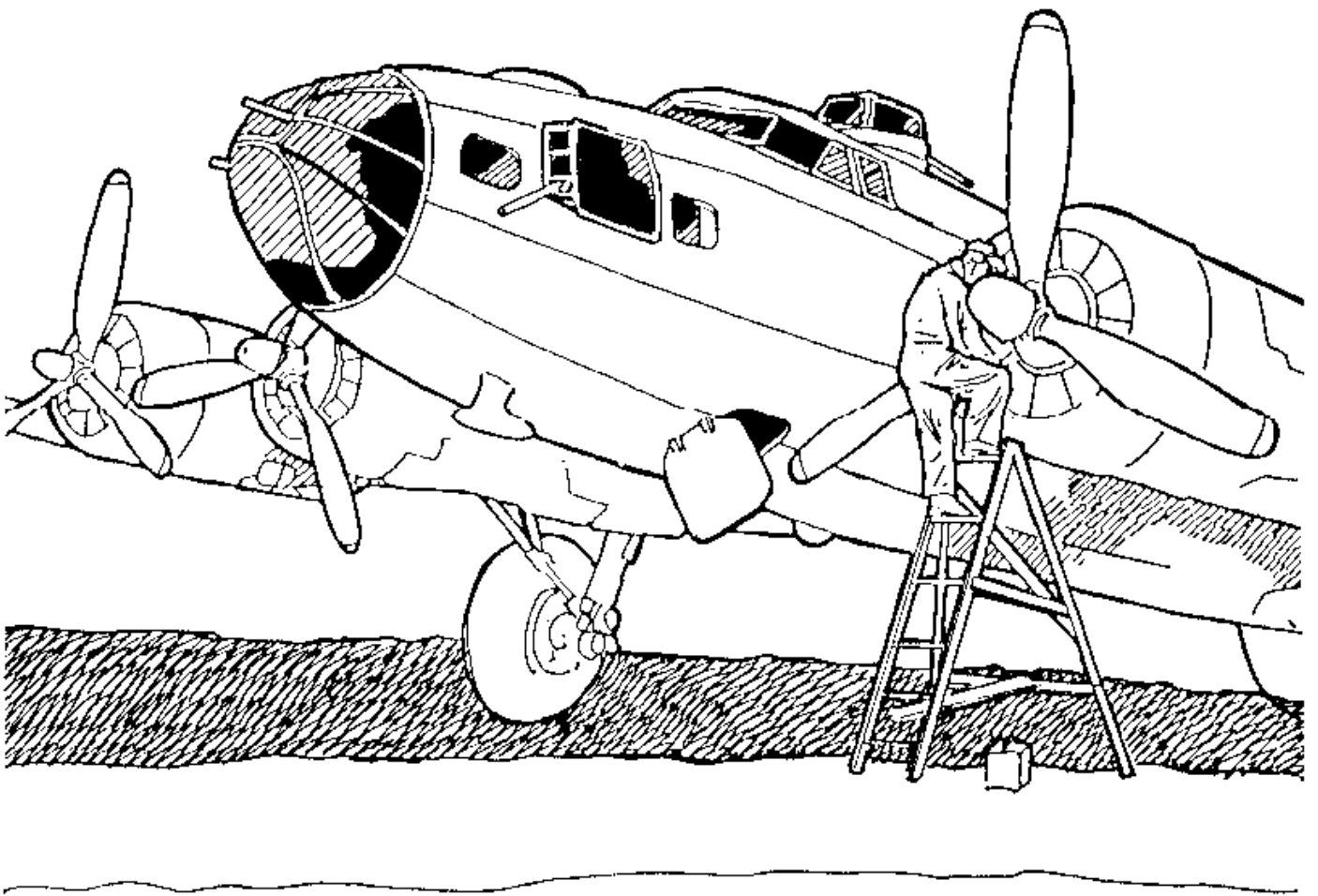


LAVENHAM/ALPHETON AIRFIELD - A BRIEF HISTORY



LAVENHAM /ALPHETON AIRFIELD

Early in 1943 lorries carrying loads of hardcore and ballast were to be seen heading up a small lane signposted "To Smith-wood Green Only". This narrow road belied the immense airfield construction work in progress just a few hundred yards away.

The hardcore being so hurriedly delivered had started life as houses and factory buildings in London which had fallen prey to Hitler's mighty Luftwaffe; an ironic twist of fate in that the wreckage of the Blitz would soon play its part in bringing destruction back to those who had precipitated it in the first instance.

All through the Spring work continued at its hectic pace. Reminders still remain in the form of signatures in the concrete taxi-ways dated 1943 and left for posterity by the construction teams.

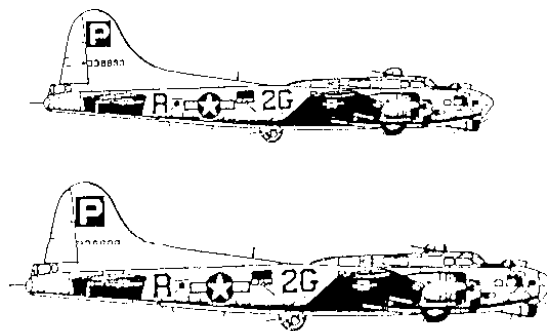
Early in 1944, the 487th Bomb Group of the 8th Air Force, United States Army Air Force moved into Lavenham Airfield, their new home. Initially they were flying Consolidated B.24H plus J's better known as the Liberator but they soon converted onto the now famous Boeing B.17G Flying Fortress. The unit letter painted on the tail plane of the "Forts" was a white letter "P" on a black background square.

Soon after the group's arrival Operations commenced including support of the D-Day landings, softening up the German lines and bombing strategic targets.

On August the 8th 1944, the 487th flew a support mission to bomb the German lines at Caen, France, each Fortress carrying twelve 500lb bombs; unfortunately bad intelligence was received and many bombs fell on the frontline Canadian troops.

The following day they bombed a ball bearing factory at Nurnburg (St Vith) Germany without success due to weather conditions. Later in the month, (on the 25th) they successfully bombed a V-3 (an experimental radio controlled bomb) test site at Rechlin Field, 40 miles N.W. of Berlin; they encountered heavy flak during the 6½ minute bomb run, but the bombs landed on target, the mission lasting 8 hours 55 minutes.

The following day, the 26th, they attacked the west coast of the Brest Peninsula, with the aim of destroying the strategically important harbour. Unfortunately the weather got in the way again. They tried the first bomb run at 19,000 ft and a second at 15,000 ft, but without success, so they brought the bombs home. However they successfully bombed the harbour on September 3rd, from 8,500 ft, without encountering much resistance.



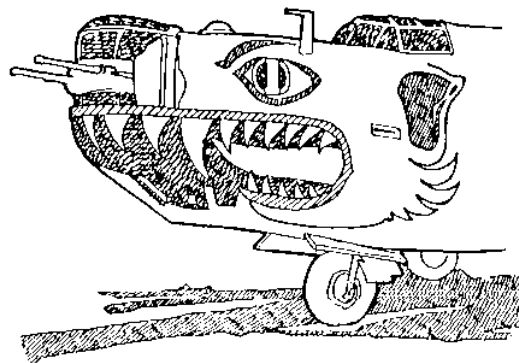
On the 8th September 1944 they hit Mainz, Germany for the first time, the temperature was -47°C , but the target was hit from 29,000 ft, using 500lb general purpose bombs. The 13th saw them attacking a marshalling yard at Darmstadt. the 17th. Schouwen in the Dutch islands, the 19th Limburg, Germany, where the target was an oil refinery which they hit in appalling weather conditions; on the 27th and 30th they attacked a chemical works at Ludwigshafen and a marshalling yard at Bielefeldt - sadly on this mission two Fort's collided with fatal results.

October 1944 witnessed an all out blitz on the German home-land, commencing on the 2nd with a raid against the Luftwaffe airfield at Kassel, with the secondary target being the railyards; both targets were hit, this mission lasting 7 hours 45 minutes. The 3rd saw an attack on the tank works at Nuremberg, on the 6th they hit an ordnance depot in Berlin where they encountered heavy flak, and on the 7th, 9th, 14th, 15th, 18th, 19th, 26th and 28th they hit railyards, tank works, oil refineries and aero-engine factories at Merseburg, Mainz, Cologne, Kassel, Mannheim, Hanover and Hamm.

In November they revisited old favourites at Merseburg, Neunkirchen and Ludwigshafen.

The last month of 1944 saw the 487th bomb Koblenz on the 2nd, Giessen on the 11th and Hanover on the 15th.

The 24th December 1944 saw them embark on their most famous mission, leading the entire 8th Air Force, attacking the airfield at Babenhausen. Fighters hit the formation before they reached the target but the Fortress that the CO., Brigadier-General Frederick Walker-Castle was flying in was seen to be hit; immediately a fire started, and the plane began to fall out of formation. Brigadier Walker-Castle took over control of the aircraft from the injured pilot and ordered the rest of the crew to bale out, which they successfully achieved. A wing then broke off the stricken bomber and the heroic Castle was killed in the resulting crash. He was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honour posthumously, the highest ranking 8th Air Force Officer to receive it.



Aschaffenburg, Mannheim and Hamburg were heavily hit on the 29th, 30th, 31st respectively and on New Years Day 1945 Brunswick and its oil storage area was hit.

Operations continued up till the cessation of hostilities in May 1945, after which the Group embarked for the States. Many surviving members of the 487th still return whenever possible to visit the old airfield, of which much remains, and to renew their acquaintance with the world famous medieval town of Lavenham.

Take a look into Lavenham Guildhall and see the several pictures of the brave General Castle, along with a display of mementoes of the very men that this brief history is about.

The airfield is situated 1 mile out of Lavenham just off the A1141 Bury St. Edmunds road. Take the first left hand turn past the Water Tower, which is signposted "To Smithwood Green Only", follow the winding road until you reach a "T" junction, turn left and you will find yourself on the orbital taxi-way. The Control Tower/Ops. Room, dispersals and billets are mostly all intact, parts of the runway however have been broken up. The airfield is private property, and not generally open to the public; any request to visit the airfield must be made in advance through Lavenham Tourist Information Centre, The Guildhall, Lavenham (Tel: Lavenham 248207) who will contact the owner to make the necessary arrangements.

HAVE YOU READ “SUFFOLK SUMMER”?

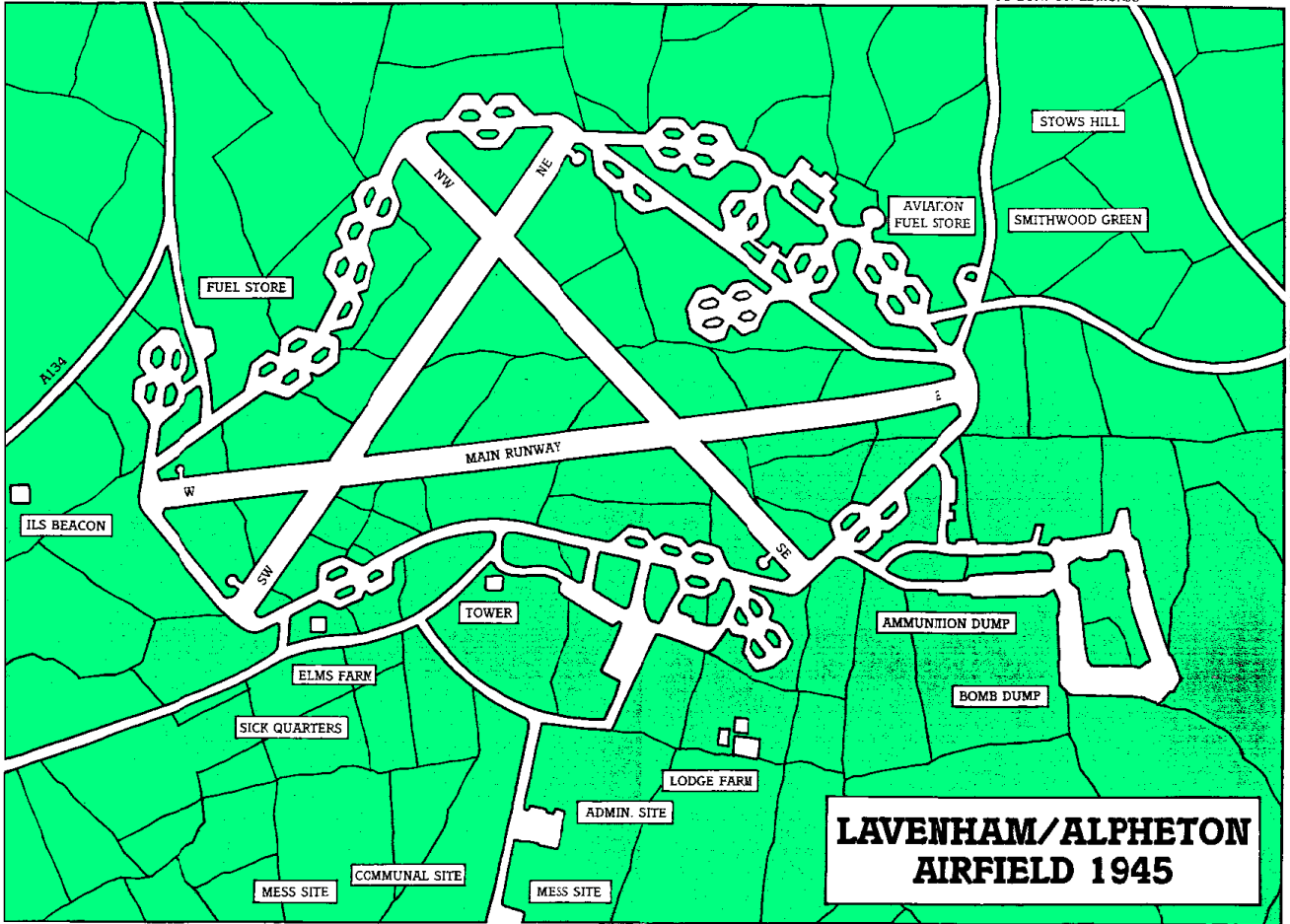
John T Appleby, author of “Suffolk Summer” was an American from Fayetteville, Arkansas, who served in the U.S. Air Force from June 1942 to November **1945**. Stationed first at Lavenham, the airfield described in the leaflet, and afterwards at Thorpe Abbots airfield, Norfolk. John Appleby’s fine book is about Suffolk, England and the English. He loved the East Anglian countryside and riding an ancient bicycle, explored its attractive villages and ancient churches.

John Appleby loved Bury St Edmunds, the ancient capital of West Suffolk some 10 miles from Lavenham. In fact he thought so much of Bury St. Edmunds and the friends he made there that he presented the whole of the royalties from “Suffolk Summer” to the Borough of Bury St. Edmunds towards the upkeep of the Abbey Gardens, those fine public gardens within the precincts of the former ancient Benedictine Abbey.

Read about Lavenham and the delightful villages nearby so vividly described by an American stationed here during World War II.

An Appleby Trail booklet is also available, describing seven cycle routes in the area.

Why not follow in John Appleby’s footsteps and visit, for yourself, some of the villages, buildings and churches which he loved so much In war-time England.



**LAVENHAM/ALPHETON
AIRFIELD 1945**