

The War-time story of RAF Leiston

By Eric R. Smith

REMEMBRANCE

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 27, 1985 WILL HAVE THE ADDED POIGNANCY ASSOCIATED WITH THE END OF A DECADE AND FORTY YEARS AFTER THE 1939-45 WAR, THOUGHTS TURN TO LOCAL AREAS THAT WERE INDELIBLY ASSOCIATED WITH THAT CONFLICT.

SUCH A PLACE WAS ROYAL AIR FORCE LEISTON, USED AS A FIGHTER BASE BY THE UNITED STATES EIGHTH AIR FORCE. THE HIGH ENDEAVOUR OF THE MEN STATIONED THERE WILL BE ESPECIALLY REMEMBERED THIS YEAR.

Leiston airfield was constructed in 1943 on a site surrounded by Saxmundham, Theberton and Leiston. The Saxmundham to Aldeburgh railway line closed in 1966, passed to the south of the field.

Although known officially as Leiston, it was often referred to as Saxmundham or Theberton and to the Americans, it became Air Force Station 373.

The airmen themselves acquired the nickname of "Yoxford Boys" after being referred to as such by William Joyce (Lord Haw Haw) over the German radio.

Three miles from the east coast, it was ideal for fighter aircraft to whom range was all important, but it also was used by bombers returning that were shot up or low on fuel and anxious to set down quickly.

The first aircraft to land at Leiston was a B-17 Flying Fortress bomber from Polebrook, Northamptonshire, which sought refuge on July 30, 1943 whilst the airfield was still in the throes of construction.

On November 29, 1943 the 358th Fighter Group arrived under command of Colonel Cecil Wells with it's P-47 Thunderbolts and it was soon in action.

After only nine weeks however, it exchanged bases with the 357th Fighter Group at Raydon. As one airman graphically put it- "We exchanged one mudhole for another".

Later, the 358th moved to France and Colonel Wells, Leiston's first Commanding Officer was killed in action.

The 357th commanded by Colonel Edward Chickering flew P-51 Mustangs and began operations from Leiston on Feb. 11, 1944.

The Group went on to fly over 300 missions over a period of one year and five months and had five Commanding Officers in that time. One of them, Colonel Henry Spicer was shot down on March 5, 1944 but survived as a prisoner of war. He sported a fierce moustache and had a personality that well befitted a fighter leader. He was actually sentenced to death while in captivity, after making uncomplimentary remarks about his captors, but the sentence was not carried out. His loss was a blow to the "Yoxford Boys".

On D-Day, the Group was engaged on ground attack duties and shortly afterwards the Luftwaffe retaliated with a midnight raid raking the Mess Hall and buildings with cannon fire.

With two thousand airmen and fifty aircraft at Leiston, the 357th had many successes and finished the war with the second highest number of enemy aircraft destroyed.

Seventeen of it's pilots were credited with ten or more aircraft and highest was Major Leonard Carson with 22. The unit received two Distinguished Unit Citations for operations over Berlin and Leipzig.

The farthest mission flown was to Poznan in Poland necessitating a round trip of 1470 miles and "shuttle" missions were flown escorting bombers on long distance missions, landing in Russia, refueling and re-arming and returning home.

The Americans were fond of naming their aircraft and embellishing them with drawings of girls in pin up poses. Named aircraft at Leiston included "Alice In Wonderland", "Daddy Rabbit", "Eager Beaver", and "Hurry Home Honey".

One hundred and twenty-eight aircraft were lost flying from Leiston and in most cases the pilot was lost with them, although some survived as prisoners. The highest number lost in one day was five.

Not all crashed over enemy territory. On January 13, 1945, a Leiston Mustang crashed at Butley near Woodbridge and another at Laxfield. On March 24, 1945 another crashed at the base. In each of these instances, the pilot was killed.

In September of 1944, a new threat appeared in the form of V-1 "Buzz Bombs", and every one would rush for cover when the engines cut out and they crashed to earth. One exploded on the base without causing much damage.

The Americans were reknown for their generosity toward children who were always happy to relieve them of their chewing gum and Hershey Bars.

At Christmas 1944, the airmen gave a party for the local children in the Red Cross Aero Club with a Father Christmas and an array of food and goodies such as many had never seen before. In return, the more tallented children gave a singing and dancing display for the airmen.

On April 15, 1945 an impressive memorial service was held at the base chapel on the death of American President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The last pilot of the unit to die in the war was Lieutenant Jacob Giel, whose aircraft was tragically struck by supplementary fuel tanks dropped by an aircraft above him.

On VE Day, the 357th celebrated in style and then the unit learned that they had been selected for occupational duties.

There were 96 aircraft and 1700 airmen at Leiston as the war ended, but as the longer serving airmen returned to the United States, there were few replacements and it was an understrength unit that flew out in July 1945 to Neubiberg, a former Luftwaffe Base near Munich.

Tragically, the 357th suffered it's heaviest loss in one day after the War when a Dakota on leave flight struck an Italian mountain killing the pilot Captain George Rice, six other pilots, three Red Cross girls and four enlisted men.

With Leiston restored to the Royal Air Force, the runways and perimeter track resounded to the noise of drill sergeants for a year, as it was used by intakes of recruits to No. 18 Recruit Centre.

After that, it ran down and was sold off in parts from 1955 onwards. Most of the site has now returned to agriculture, from which it was clutched in 1943.

Occasionally, American veterans still return to Leiston and gaze across the area where they spent the most dramatic period of their lives.

Over a hundred fighter pilots made their final take off from this historic field, and on this Remembrance Sunday, it is fitting that the sacrifices of this special generation of Airmen should be remembered.

The above article was sent to us by Paul Brown, an Intelligence Officer of the 362nd, via. Lem Henslee. Thanks to both men. We have tried to photo copy the newspaper headlines, location and date of the issue. The newspaper print of this article was so small and smudged from it's being photo copied that in order to make it legible for you, we have re-typed it.

IT IS SURE GRATIFYING TO KNOW THAT WE HAVE NOT BEEN FORGOTTEN BY OUR GOOD FRIENDS BACK IN ENGLAND. ERIC SMITH DID A FINE JOB FOR US.

His article included a picture of The aircraft "Tony Boy" and the following crew:
Sgt. Currie (Robert Currie, our Active list of Oak Park, Michigan)

Colonel Henry Spicer (On our Roll of Honor)

Cpl. Hamilton (which we believe to be Robert E. Hamilton, on our Roll of Honor)??