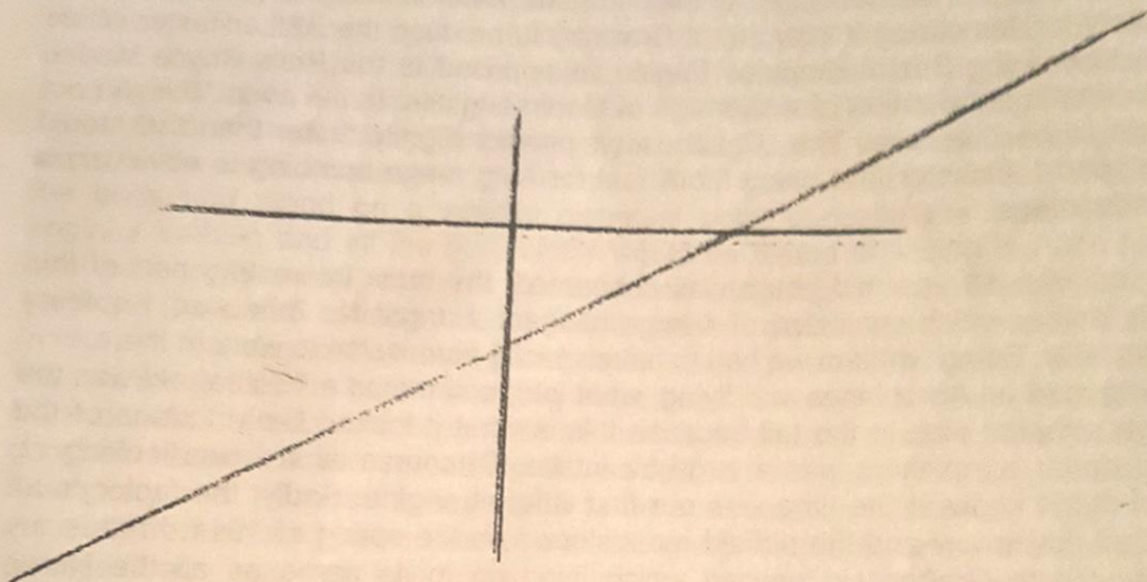


**GRAFTON UNDERWOOD
AIRFIELD
REMEMBERED**



1944

BY C.K. BARKER

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Grafton Underwood Aerodrome Remembered 1944

I first heard the name Grafton Underwood mentioned by my Foreman, one Bill Johnson in about Sept/Oct 1943 when he mentioned that the Halifax Bomber had crashed there. The name Grafton Underwood promptly stuck in my memory as I thought at the time, what a pretty name. Little did I realise within 18 months, I should be working there and the same Foreman would be in charge of the contract for the Air Ministry. At the time we were building a new Aeroplane Factory for Armstrong Whitworth of Coventry to produce the B2 Lancaster which was to use the Bristol Hercules Engine as opposed to the Rolls Royce Merlin. This was in anticipation of a shortage of Merlin engines. In the event, this did not prove to be the case. The B2 Lancaster proved slightly faster than the Merlin equipped Lancaster, but using more fuel for long range bombing is obviously a disadvantage.

As far as a 16 year old youth was concerned, the most interesting part of this new factory which consisted of 4 large hangars. Hangar No 3 housed 1 solitary Lancaster. Being workers we had to have special permission to work in there. Being mad on Aeroplanes and flying, what intrigued me as a 16 Year old was the large exhaust pipe in the tail because this is what it looked like. In place of the mid upper turret there was a large air intake. Of course what I was looking at, and didn't know at the time was our first little jet engine. Sadly, the factory's all pulled down now and the airfield redeveloped. In the spring of 1944, I made my first visit to Grafton Underwood which lived up to its name as all the Horse Chestnuts were in bloom and ducks on the stream which runs through the centre of the village. In these idyllic surroundings what seemed a little incongruous or out of place, was the heavy American Airforce traffic through the village including the trucks with bombs thrown in the back. These were always driven by Negro drivers who I noticed when using the mess-hall that they always sat together and never mixed with the White Americans.

As I was dining the Americans were very generous and only charged us 1 Shilling for a meal, which we British being on very tight rations were very grateful. Our job at Grafton was to build 14" blast walls around the Electrical Installations. I could never understand why they went to that expense so late in the war when we had complete mastery of the air until the advent of the Doodle Bug and V2. Of course, as a teenager, I found a very active bomber field absolutely fascinating. Some mornings we'd arrive and the base would be virtually empty. This was when the fortress squadrons were on deep penetration Raids into Germany. The organisation and take off of 4 Squadrons Fortresses. I found absolutely fascinating that they would start taxiing from their dispersal points around the perimeter track to the head of the main runway. Whilst taxiing the pilots when applying the brakes, there would be this eerie screeching which could be heard from some considerable distance. All eyes would be on the watch tower and suddenly 2 green flares would pass into the air from the top of the tower.

This started the first fortress rolling down the main runway for take off. Then every 2 minutes there would be a follow on, until all 4 Squadrons were Airborne. They would climb and climb and form a formation over Leicestershire. When all in Battle Order they would set course for Germany.

Apart from the screeching of brakes made by the B17's when they were taxiing, there was the roaring of engines being run up by the ground crew at dispersal. The sound of the heavy petrol tankers with a chain dragging which made a strange tinkling noise which I understand was dragged for the purpose of static electricity. The tannoy system blaring out orders, the most familiar of which despite the passing of 60 odd years, I still remember vividly the following message "Will All Drivers Who Drove For The Mission This Morning Report To Motor Control Immediately" Another very exciting event, we were working quite close to the butts whenever a replacement B 17 came in, it would taxi round to the butts and stand on a special dispersal point opposite the butts with all engines running and all the gun turrets would be tested including the two hand held guns in the waist positions. What I found intriguing with the heavy point 50 machine guns with a firing rate of 500 rounds a minute, the volume of bullets going into the clay butts would punch holes as large as rabbit holes. I've often thought since that the butts have long since been removed, that there must have been one hell of a lot of scrap metal. When the Armourers made up the machine gun belt I believe it ran something like as follows: 1 Armour Piercing, 2 Ball, 1 Incendiary and 1 Tracer. I may stand to be corrected on this issue. What I do distinctly remember is one member of the gang, a bricklayer by the name of George Drage, was very handy with his hands - he used to like to acquire a point 50 Armour piercing as the core of the bullet was solid steel and made a very handy punch. He also made cigarette lighters consisting of a large hexagon brass nut with the sides made of an old English Penny with a Three Penny Piece set in the centre which he sold to the Americans, for a good price as they liked to acquire them as souvenirs to take home. What I would also like to comment on - before D-Day, the numbers of losses and Battle damage compared to after D-Day Aug/Sept time. The reason being, was severe bombing of all the synthetic oil plants in Germany. A place called Merzburg. As I was working quite often near the perimeter track, they would arrive back from a mission roughly mid afternoon as I was so close, I could observe each B 17 from close quarters and observe the Battle damage, for example, wings and fuselage, tail plane, and tail fin would be peppered with small holes, some as much as 2-3" across with a jagged piece of metal sticking up. On their return from such raids, there would be the inevitable red flares fired from the Aircraft which indicated 'Wounded Aboard'. The Americans developed armoured suits for air crew to withstand the velocity of any aircraft shell splinters and were proved to be very effective. The B 17 concerned would then be given landing priority. There would be an ambulance gracing the end of the runway, to rush the injured airman to the base hospital. The B 17's crews that had completed their 25 missions would shoot off every flare that they carried in the aircraft in jubilation at finishing their tour of duty and returning to the States. Strange to say, I felt great jubilation in my own heart as my own dear brother, had already been a POW for 3 years.

At this point, I must mention the crews named their bombers and marked each mission by a bomb symbol under the Pilots cabin. The names I vividly remember. These Aircraft were the old B-17E, Navada Avenger, Hells Messenger, Patches the Second, the name implied literally covered in patches. About this time at Grafton just before the invasion the new B-17G's started replacing the camouflage E's. These had a natural metal finish and sported such names as Dam Yankee, The Lead Banana, and the Green Banana. The bomb symbols represented each mission, it is claimed, apart from saving the cost of camouflage paint increase the speed of the aircraft, by some 5-8 mph. The B-17G differed also, in the armourment in the form of a point 50 twin machine gun turret mounted in the nose to counter the daring and skilful frontal attack by the Germans Fighter Pilots who were extremely skilful and extremely brave.

When one considers the closing speed of an ME109 head onto a B-17 was something like 600 mph which did not leave much time for margins of error. As a matter of interest, by working on the Airfield at the Dispersal Point I found a discarded flexiglass panel from the pilots cabin which had been struck by two bullets from an attacking ME109 the plane concerned obviously got back safely, but it must have been one hell of a time for the pilots. As indeed, many of the pilots were killed in these encounters and the navigator or crew member would endeavour to fly the aircraft back. The problem was of course, landing. I know of at least one case at neighbouring Polebrook airbase where the crew managed to arrive back to base, sadly on the 5th attempt they stalled the aircraft and were all killed. Such are the fortunes of war.

Quite often while going about our business and working on the base, I couldn't help but notice as a young man how haggard and unkempt the crews appeared while undergoing the terrible stress of flying in daylight over Germany unescorted. With the coming of the superb P-51 Mustang which enabled them, the Fortresses, to be escorted to their target area's in Germany. Even on the base you couldn't help but notice the dropping of battle damage and great reduction in losses from the base. Quite often particularly in the bad winter of 44/45 we'd arrive in the morning to see the RAF Bomber Squadrons which had landed in the night, their own bases being closed because of fog, for example, one morning we arrived to find two Squadrons of Canadian Airforce Halifaxes on the base - and sure enough the inevitable tannoy booming out the following message "All Canadian Air Crews please report to Flying Control Immediately" and sure enough between the hours of 10 and 11 they took off from Grafton. I must tell of one amusing incident which I have never forgotten. On my way to the mess-hall for my 1 shilling lunch, I passed two Americans on bicycles going in a different direction, who made the following comment - "Whats for chow bud" - same old s__t edd". Considering we Brits were on short rations I certainly didn't regard the food as such.

Incidentally, every 100 missions that were flown there'd be a major celebration - extra rations and barrels of russet apples almost like a Christmas feast.

While noting the incredible bravery of the fortress crews I witnessed an example of pure cowardice. It happened like this - During the morning take off for a mission, unfortunately, a fortress crashed into the wood about 300 yards away

and three absolutely panic stricken American ground staff came running down to where we were working and shouted the following "You guys get the hell out of here" A ship crashed into the wood and it has bombs aboard. They had made a mistake, it wasn't on a mission, it was on a test flight. The typical British response to this, bearing in mind all the bricklayers were either elderly or very young, like myself at the time, just carried on laying bricks and mumbling something like "whats the b___ing panic?" This made the Americans not only look foolish, but get a grip of themselves and started walking back to the barracks.

Interesting flying incidents witnessed by the writer:-

Whilst working on the airfield one day, the B-17 flew over the Field trailing black smoke from the starboard outer engine. I would say that there must have been 3-4000 ft. The pilot put the nose down in a dive, into the landing approach the fire engine already waiting on the runway. Fortunately, it landed safely. On another occasion, the B-17 back from a raid with about 9ft of its wing tip missing. It appeared just as if someone with a gigantic saw had sawn through the wing. This in turn landed safely. On another occasion, whilst we were working on the edge of the airfield opposite the short North to South runway, a B-17 appeared to be practising what is known in the Airforce as circuit and bumps. The first time it came round too fast, undercarriage down and bounced like a giant bird doing 2 or 3, hops and then took off again. The second was just as bad as the first, I could never quite understand why the landings were so bad. In view of the fact that it was an active operational base and not a training area. On the 3rd approach, it bounced once then a gigantic sheet of flame flew out from the port engines. The port undercarriage leg collapsed. It swerved as if it was coming straight for us. It is amazing how agile even rheumatically old men can become in such a situation. There were base Fire Engines on the job and also civilian Fire Engines came from Kettering. They appear to be getting the flames under control, when it would seem that they ran out of foam. The fire again got out of control and they abandoned it when all the ammunition started going up.

The most serious crash I witnessed was during a morning take off for a mission. It was about the 5th or 6th B-17 to take off. The Pilot had opened up the throttles and rapidly increased his speed. At a point just before the tail lifted off and before take off proper, there was a bang and the aircraft concerned swerved off the main runway with a burst tyre. On leaving the runway the undercarriage leg collapsed. It was an extremely dangerous situation the, aircraft was fully bombed up and fuelled up. Escape hatches flew open and the crew rapidly got out of the aircraft. What I remember most distinctly about this is that one of the Pilots scrambled out of the escape hatch above the Pilots Flight Deck and ran the entire length of the wing before jumping from the wingtip with the port undercarriage collapsed. This being the starboard side. He must have been some 20ft off the ground, when I saw the pilot hit the ground, he still got up and ran. Had the tyre burst some 10-20 seconds later the consequences would have been far more serious for the crew. Fortunately, they all escaped in this incident. Such are the fortunes of war.

Being a lifelong naturalist and countryman, the Airfield situated in the middle of one of the Buccleuch Estates, on several occasions, walking through the wood to the mess-hall for lunch (price one shilling), as all the grass had been worn away by the constant pedestrian activity and cycling by the Americans taking a short cut to the mess-hall, I noticed what appeared to be the tracks of a Deer as the slots were more elongated than a sheeps. Sure enough, a few days later on a lovely October day, I surprised this magnificent fallow buck with a great spread of antlers, not 20 yds into the wood. He stood for a moment and I moved my arm. He took off through the undergrowth and trees and what amazed me, despite the great antlers, was the ease and speed of which he sped out of sight. On another occasion, I watched a fox in a nearby field working the field for ground nesting birds, such as the Lapwing and it came into the wood in which I was standing and came within 10 ft of me. Foxes have an acute sense of smell and hearing, but their eyesight appears to be poor. Providing one keeps perfectly still, the fox is unable to tell the difference between a man or a post. It is sudden movement that spooks them.

I have noticed this on several occasions. On another occasion, I found a Pheasants nest with 9 eggs in it. My greatest find was a in a delightful little glade in the wood, which was a Wood warblers nest. It was pure luck. I noticed this little bird approach a nest in a tree. On closer examination I could see this tiny little entrance hole in which I could just insert 2 fingers. It contained 2 eggs. It was a great find. I couldn't identify the bird immediately, but had to consult my books. As I could not consult my bird watching Mentor, my dear elder brother, who was languishing in a POW Camp and had been for 3 years. I realise now, as I am an old man, how the countryside has changed so much in the last 50 years.

Not only the disappearing bird life, but our beautiful wild flowers, the Cowslips, Primrose, White and Blue Violets losing their scent.

On paying a visit to Grafton now, how nature has healed the scars of war. The concrete runways have been taken up and planted with trees. I had the good fortune to fly over the base in a light aircraft with a friend of mine. Its interesting to see the leaf green image of runways still there, as opposed to the harsh camouflage runways of wartime. That concludes my story of Grafton Underwood as a 16 year old youth.

Charles Keith Barker
August 2007

GRAFTON UNDERWOOD – DEDICATION

TO ALL THE CREWS OF THE RAF AND COMMONWEALTH BOMBER COMMAND AND THE EIGHTH UNITED STATES, ARMY AIRFORCE AND ALLIES WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES FOR THE CAUSE OF FREEDOM 1939 - 1945.

NOT FORGETTING OUR ENEMIES - LUFTWAFFE WHO FOUGHT WITH GREAT COURAGE AND SKILL FOR THE WRONG CAUSE.