

## Flixton

During World War II, my father was a B-24 navigator in the 8'th Air Force. He was part of the 446'th Bomb Wing and flew out of Bungay England, which caused the unit to be known as the "Bungay Buckaroos." Technically, the airfield was closer to the village of Flixton than to Bungay, but Flixton was so small as to be easily overlooked. The flat farmlands of Suffolk made an ideal location for an airfield, and within minutes the planes could be over the North Sea heading for industrial targets in northwestern Germany.

My father never talked much about the war. To him, as to many of his generation, the war was a terrible responsibility that was thrust upon them as they graduated from high school. They did not march to war amid cheering crowds, singing songs and expecting a great adventure as their fathers had. The mud and the massacre of World War I had stripped the veil of romance from war and made them fully aware of the horrors they faced. They fought because there was no alternative, and they saved the world from an unspeakable evil. Then the survivors came home and tried to fit back into their civilian lives as quickly as possible.

Compared to many, my father was lucky. He had several near misses, but no serious injuries. The hose to his oxygen mask was cut in two by shrapnel over Germany. My father was a navigator, which meant he had to keep a close eye on the terrain underneath the plane to insure they were on the correct course. My father was not a tall man, so when they were not under fire he often sat on his flack helmet to get a better view out the plane's windows. One day they came under fire before anyone expected it, and his flack helmet was shot out from under him. In this case his helmet was right where he needed it, as he would have been seriously injured had he been sitting in his seat.

The "Bungay Buckaroos" were the first bomb unit to attack German defensive positions in Normandy on D-Day, and they continued to provide support as the Allies slowly fought their way inland over the following months. My father's plane was forced down on one of these missions, barely making it back to liberated Holland before landing. My father escaped this event with nothing more serious than a scolding from my mother, who was upset because he stopped writing. (The censors wouldn't let him tell

her where he was, and the mail service was spotty in the newly liberated territory.) After the war he sometimes joked that his only war injuries were spraining his ankle playing basketball and hitting his head on the edge of a swimming pool.

An occasional joke like that was about all I ever heard my father say about the war. He had no interest in veteran's organizations. My mother said he occasionally wrote to a few wartime buddies in the years immediately after the war, but that soon died down to an annual exchange of Christmas cards. Eventually even that stopped. In his later years he began to show a renewed interest in the war. He joined the 8'th Air Force Association and occasionally told my younger brother stories about the war, but that was after I'd left home. The only time I remember him telling a serious story about the war was on Christmas Day, about twenty years after the war ended. Something that day reminded him of a mission he had flown on a Christmas during the war. They bombed a German rail center shortly after noon. Even during the mission he had worried about the civilians who lived near the rail center, as he thought they were probably sitting down to Christmas dinner when the bombers appeared overhead. He hoped they had been able to get to their shelters before the bombs fell.

I was privileged to join my father for an 8'th Air Force Association event a few years before he died. I was in the Air Force at the time, stationed at Wright-Patterson AFB Ohio. Wright-Patt is the home of the Air Force Museum, and the museum was building a small park with trees dedicated to World War II flying units. My father came for the dedication of the 446'th Bomb Wing tree. I think he was a little disappointed that he didn't recognize anyone there, but he never said anything about it. The 446'th was a big unit and a lot of people passed through it during the war, only a handful of whom made it to the tree dedication. Still, hope springs eternal.

In addition to the tree dedication, the museum opened its B-24 to the veterans and allowed me to walk through it with them. For most, it was the first time they'd seen a B-24 since the war. I had never seen the inside of a B-24 before, and I had never flown any aircraft in combat, so I was surprised by the impact it had on me. As we inched our way through the plane I suddenly had a vision of myself being bounced violently around the

fuselage as the plane spun out of control. I was fighting my way through flying debris, trying to get a firm grasp on anything so I could pull my way to an escape hatch and bail out before the inevitable crash. Apparently I wasn't the only one having bad visions. One of the veterans came stumbling back from the cockpit, pushing his way past the people going forward and muttering "Excuse me" as he mopped beads of perspiration from his forehead. His visions weren't in his imagination, however. He was a B-24 pilot who had been overcome by the memories that came flooding back as soon as he sat in the pilot's seat. Even after more than 40 years those memories were overpowering.

Many years later I had an opportunity to travel to England on business. I took a few days of vacation while I was there, rented a car, and drove to Flixton. It was a very small village, as it always has been, but now it is also home to the Norfolk and Suffolk Air Museum. They have a nice collection of 446'th Bomb Wing memorabilia there, along with aircraft and exhibits devoted to the various British aviation units that flew in that area dating back to World War I. Flixton is also the home of a charming little bed & breakfast and one of the nicest pubs I have ever visited. I sipped a pint of bitters after my dinner in that pub, and I talked to the bartender about the Flixton airfield. He wasn't old enough to remember the war, but he knew the area and told me a few stories about places the aircrews used to frequent. The pub I was in had been built long before the war, so it was quite possible my father had sipped a few pints there himself. The bartender assured me that there was nothing left of the airfield itself.

It was a beautiful May evening when I left the pub, and it stays light very late at that time of the year, so I decided to go for a walk. It was an aimless wander. I quickly left the main road and walked down a country lane that looked like it might lead to a bit of scenery. Spring was well advanced, and there were wildflowers and a clear blue sky to attract my attention. Near the main road the lane was paved, but it soon turned to gravel. Then it became two ruts in the dirt, with grass growing in the center. It turned to gravel again, but it was a coarser, less consistent type of gravel. I thought I might be getting close to a major road, especially when I realized the gravel was broken concrete pavement. I started seeing a few pieces of unbroken concrete, like an old road with grass growing through innumerable cracks. Then I saw a heavy duty steel grate for a storm

drain. With a shudder I realized nobody puts a drain like that along a country lane, even a paved one. That drain was part of the Flixton airfield.



Excitedly I followed the broken concrete path. It widened into an unmistakable stretch of airfield pavement, probably a turnaround. I looked at the tree line on the horizon, wondering how many times my father had looked at that tree line and prayed they'd clear it with their heavily laden bomber.

I can't describe my sensations at that point. I didn't imagine that I heard the sound of B-24 engines, and I certainly didn't actually hear them. It was more as though I heard the shadow of an echo that had died out long ago. It wasn't just the sound of one airplane. It was the sound of dozens of planes, each with four 1,000 hp Pratt & Whitney 14 cylinder radial engines. The thunder generated by those engines echoed across the Suffolk fields long after the planes had departed. And I didn't see ghosts of the vanished B-24s struggle to break free of the earth and rise above the trees. I saw traces of their passing, a slight disturbance in the air which had not completely settled in the nearly sixty years since the last B-24 had crossed that horizon. It was as though the veil of time was not completely opaque, and I could see faint shadows of aircraft that had occupied the point

in space where I was staring. I had a glimpse of the same place, but at a different point in time.

It took a long time for the feeling that I was adrift in time to leave. I slowly returned to the here and now. I noticed the evening shadows were lengthening, and I needed to retrace my steps. As I walked back to the village I realized the bartender was wrong. The airfield wasn't gone. It was still there. My father was still there, too. They were just at a slightly different point in time.



Author's Note: This is a true story.

**Epilog:** Twelve years after my first visit to Flixton, and long after I wrote this story, my wife and I visited Flixton while touring Europe to celebrate our 30'th wedding anniversary. I had done some additional research on the 446'th and discovered a few of

the original buildings still remained. The farmer who now owned the land used them to store farm equipment. I wrote to the Norfolk and Suffolk Air Museum before our trip, and they graciously made arrangements with the farmer to take my wife and I to see some of the remaining buildings, including the Officers' Club. The men of the 446'th had painted murals on the walls of the Club, many of which still remained.



One was a large map of the United States. The artist had evidently run out of room at the bottom of the map, so the Southern states were drawn individually on either side. There appeared to be graffiti on the map, small pencil scratchings that were invisible from a short distance. Upon closer examination, they turned out to be the names of cities and towns. Not necessarily major cities, and certainly not a comprehensive list. “Maybe these are the home towns of the crew members” I suggested. As soon as the words left my lips I was struck by the significance of what I had just said. I quickly turned my attention to Indiana. There, in the northern part of the state, my father’s home town of “Goshen” was clearly visible. It was written in my father’s handwriting. Seventy years after he had written it, this tiny piece of his identity remains.

