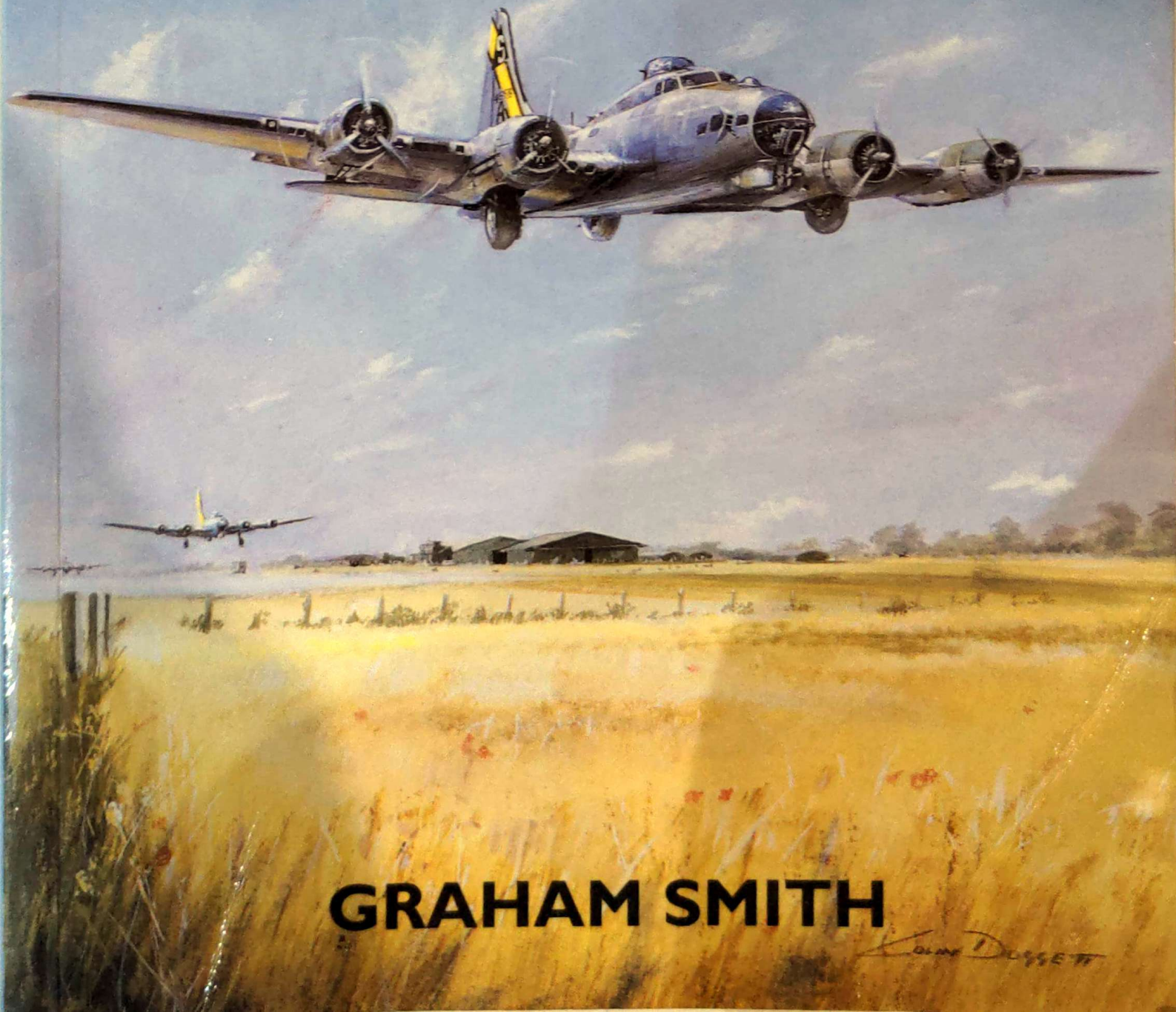


NORTHAMPTONSHIRE AIRFIELDS IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

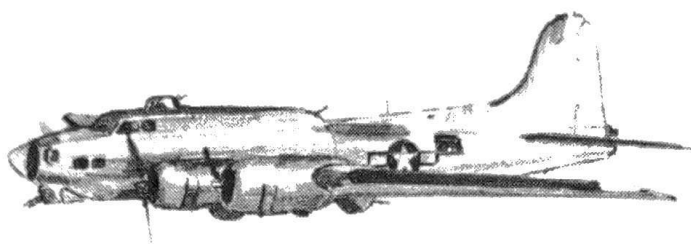


GRAHAM SMITH

Colin DUNSETT

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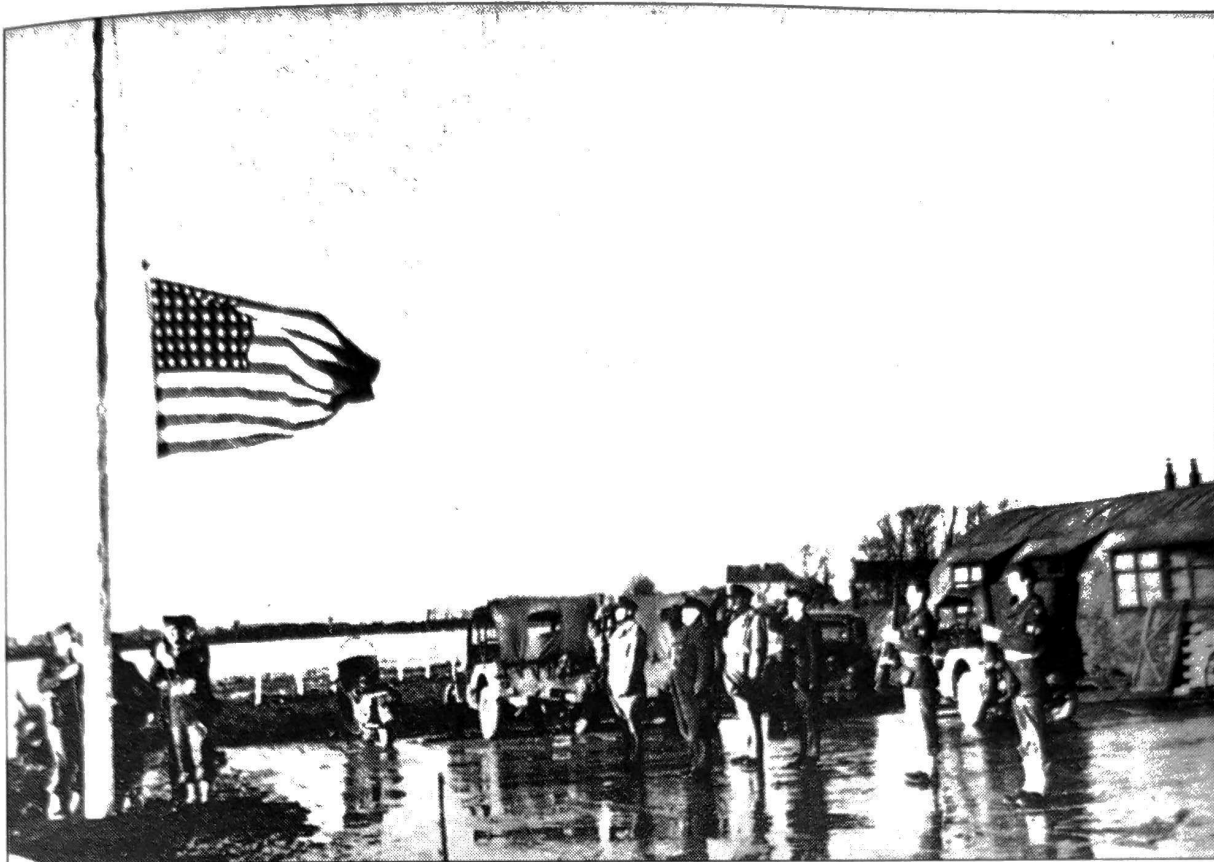
DEENETHORPE



In a lay-by alongside the A427 road from Corby to Oundle and about two miles past Weldon, can be found a most impressive granite memorial. Dedicated to 'The Best Damned Outfit in the USAAF', it commemorates the airmen of the 401st Bomb Group that flew from Deenethorpe airfield from late 1943 until June 1945. It should be said that every American airman thought that his own Bomb or Fighter Group was the best unit in the Eighth, although the veterans of the 401st are the only ones that were prepared to have their belief etched in stone! The memorial stands close to the end of one of the old runways and the airfield lies due north of its namesake village.

This Class A standard airfield was built during 1943 and was one of the last wartime airfields to open in the county. It was handed over to the USAAF by Squadron Leader E. H. G. Watson on 20th December. However, the first American airmen had already arrived on 3rd November and they quickly began the task of preparing their new base for the arrival of the B-17s, which had been temporarily housed at Bassingbourn and Polebrook. The delay had, at least, given the aircrews a breathing space to recover from their rather fraught and harrowing transatlantic crossing via Goose Bay, Meeks Field, Iceland to Prestwick. October was not the most favourable time to fly the northern ferry route especially for such relatively inexperienced airmen.

It was not until the 19th of the month that the first B-17Gs began to move into Deenethorpe. The 401st was the first Group to be almost fully equipped with these latest models of the famous bomber. The main change in the aircraft had been the provision of a Bendix twin-gun 'chin' turret in the nose of the aircraft. This modification had been made by Boeing at the express request of the Eighth Air Force as an attempt to counter the Luftwaffe's head-on frontal attacks to which the



The 401st Bomb Group takes over Deenethorpe on 20th December 1943. (Smithsonian Institution)

B-17Fs were suddenly proving rather vulnerable. The Group had also been assigned 60 aircraft, the first unit to benefit from the increase in the squadron complement from nine to fifteen aircraft, although it would be almost four months before the Group was finally up to a full complement as many of its new B-17Gs and their crews had been transferred to more experienced Groups, especially the 351st at Polebrook. The model 'G' proved to be the most numerous B-17 mark with over 8,600 finally being produced.

The 401st was the last of the county's Eighth Air Force Groups to enter the air war. In theory at least its crews should have been far better prepared for their battle ahead, as they all had passed through the School of Applied Tactics in Florida, where the bitter combat experiences gained by the Eighth in over twelve months of operations were passed on by veteran airmen to the new crews. Even before the Group became operational, two of its officers had received gallantry awards – Captain George Gould and Major Allison Brooks – for their brave actions, whilst stationed at Polebrook, in rescuing nine airmen from that tragic accident noted earlier under Collyweston. Indeed, by the end of the war over 1,000 of the Group's airmen had received awards.

Major Brooks would later become the Group's Executive Officer and gain fame as the leader of the Eighth's first Scouting Force. This Unit was equipped with P-51s, which were flown by bomber pilots who had volunteered for the Force after completing their tours. Flying ahead of the Main Force, they would seek out high cloud formations and the current weather conditions along the planned flight and in the target areas. They would then radio back this information to the formation leaders and maybe advise alternative targets if it was thought necessary.

The ultimate success of the 401st as one of the most efficient and effective Groups in the Eighth Bomber Command owes much to its first Commander, Colonel Harold W. Bowman, who remained in command until December 1944. He had previously been a staff officer in Washington, and under his firm and positive leadership the 401st achieved a fine operational record with the second highest standard of bombing accuracy in the Command. Like the other three Bomb Groups in the county, the 401st was placed in the 1st Bomb Division (it had been upgraded from a Wing in September) and the 92nd Combat Bomb Wing, which would later be renumbered the 94th. The Wing had its headquarters at Polebrook, so the new crews would operate alongside their erstwhile colleagues (351st) at Polebrook, and be joined, in February 1944, by even newer 'greenhorns' – the 457th Group operating from Glatton.

The remnants of the Group's B-17Gs began to arrive at Deenethorpe on 19th November. They carried the Group's special identification code on their tail-planes – a black 'S' within a white triangle – though from August 1944 this would be reversed to a white 'S' in a black triangle with the addition of a yellow diagonal band. Like all Groups in the Eighth, each squadron was given its own individual code – SC, IN, IW and IY for 612th to 615th squadrons respectively. For the next week the crews continued their operational training – assembly skills, navigation exercises, simulated bomb runs, escape procedures and the inevitable close formation flying, remembering the old adage, which would have been emphasised time and time again at the school in Florida – 'the tighter you fly the lower the losses'.

On the 26th of the month the crews were considered ready for their first operation. Twenty left for the port area of Bremen and severe fighter opposition was encountered with 19 aircraft in total destroyed. Despite heavy clouds and enemy smokescreens 16 of the Group's crews claimed to have bombed. On the return flight a B-17 collided with one of the Group's aircraft, named *Fancy Nancy*, which resulted in

the ball turret being almost cleanly removed and killing the gunner. With great skill the pilot managed to bring the stricken aircraft back to make an emergency landing at Detling but the B-17 was later declared a write-off.

The problems of operating during a European winter were soon brought home to the crews; on 30th November 21 aircraft left for Solingen but because of heavy cloud formations the mission was aborted by the Division. General Eaker's diktat to his Divisional commanders had always been clear and unequivocal, that if a target had not been effectively bombed, 'you will return again and again until the job is done properly'! Thus it was that on the following day the Division was again in action over Solingen. Almost 300 B-17s, led by six PFF aircraft, attacked this target, which was just to the east of Dusseldorf and sited in the dreaded Ruhr, known to RAF crews as The Happy Valley or The Valley of No Return! It was a severe test for the inexperienced crews. Twenty-four aircraft in total were lost on the mission (8%) but all 15 aircraft returned safely to Deenethorpe and furthermore every single crew claimed to have bombed the target. The foundation was laid of the Group's reputation for the bombing accuracy of its crews, a high standard that was maintained throughout the war.

It was a rather sad fact that during the war almost one in six of the Eighth's heavy bomber losses were due to accidental causes. These accidents were more prevalent on take-off when the heavily loaded aircraft afforded very slim margins of error, be they human or mechanical, and, of course, poor weather conditions only heightened such risks. On 5th December when 20 crews were leaving to attack French airfields around Paris, one B-17, *Zenobia El Elephante*, appeared to lose power on take-off and crashed into a uninhabited cottage at Deenethorpe village. All the crew were miraculously rescued from the blazing aircraft and the villagers were warned before the full load of bombs exploded. Considerable damage was caused to the village but only two airmen were injured. The terrific blast was said to have been felt in **Kettering** some twelve miles away. It was rather ironic that the subsequent operation had to be abandoned because of adverse weather conditions.

On Christmas Eve 1943, the Eighth launched its first major assault on V1 and V2 rocket sites, which were mainly situated in the Pas de Calais area of northern France. The Allied bombing offensive of these rocket targets was codenamed Operation Crossbow, but these operations soon became known as 'NoBall' missions by the American crews.



B-17 of 613th Bomb Squadron returning from Kiel, 13th December 1943. (Smithsonian Institution)

Although rumours abounded about the nature of these strange targets, most of the crews were unaware of their true purpose. The Group would be engaged over these targets in both January and February but it was not really until the first V1 rocket was launched in June 1944 that their sites were heavily bombed by the Allied Air Forces. The first Eighth operation, which comprised over 700 aircraft, was achieved without a single casualty. But not all of these operations were routine flights, or 'milk-runs' in USAAF slang. Although the crews were only over hostile territory for a relatively short period, quite formidable flak could be encountered, which was often as intense and fierce as that experienced over many German industrial targets.

It was not until the penultimate day of the year that the Group suffered its first loss in action over Ludwigshafen, and the following day's operation proved even more costly. The primary targets were airfields around Bordeaux on the French Atlantic coast, which were being used by the Luftwaffe's long-range bombers to attack and harry the vital Allied shipping convoys. The Group attacked Chateaubernard airfield at Cognac, and the Commander of 614th squadron, Major Wayne Eveland, and his crew were shot down by an enemy fighter. On the return flight another badly damaged B-17 crashed near the Isle of Wight with no survivors. The long eight-hour flight in poor weather conditions resulted in many aircraft running short of fuel and no less

than 18 B-17s made crash-landings in the United Kingdom. Two of the Group's aircraft were abandoned by their crews; one crashed near Ware and the other finally came to ground near Kimbolton. During the month the Division had 26 aircraft written-off to add to over 60 aircraft lost in action.

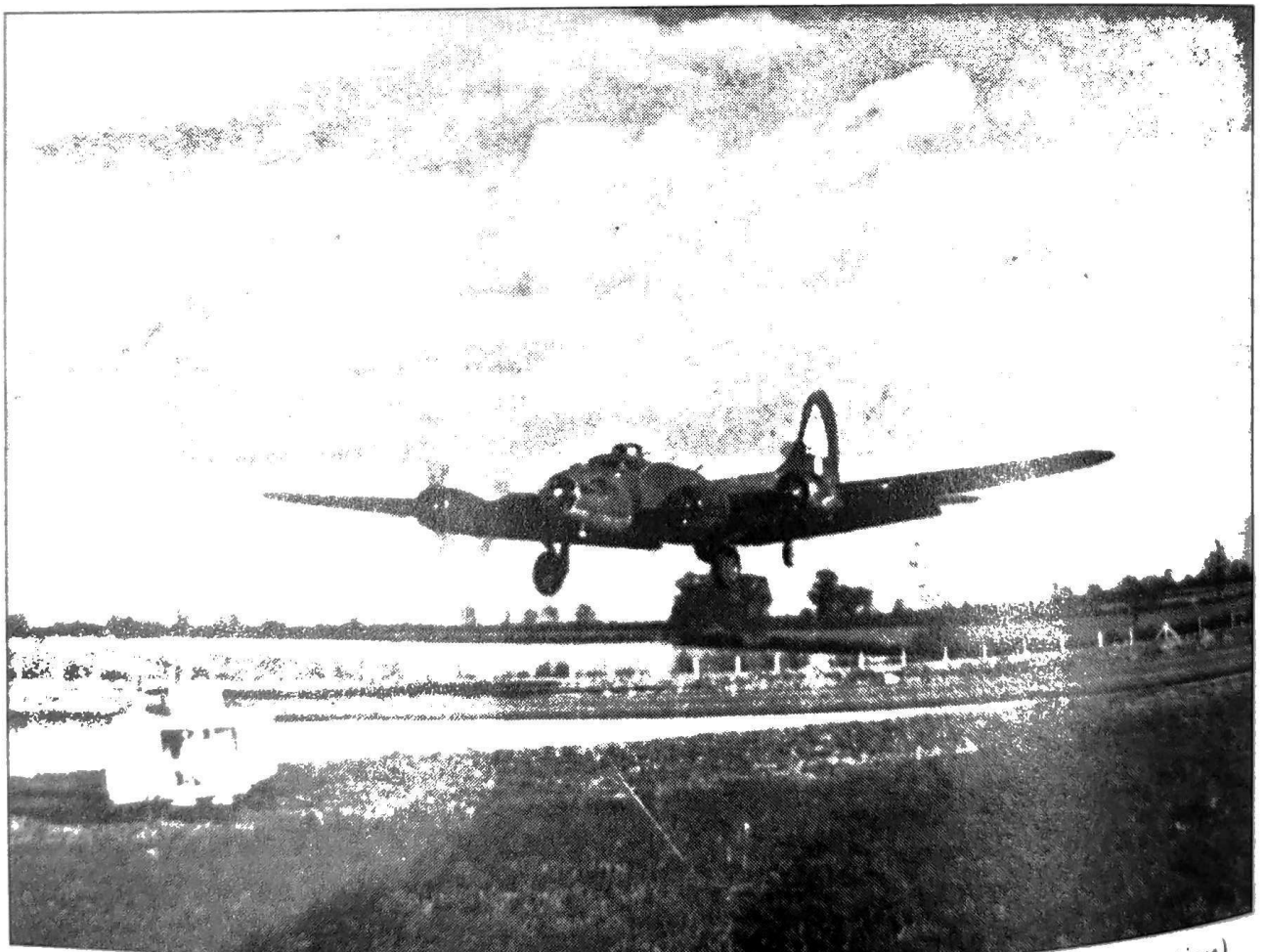
The Cognac mission, difficult though it was, paled into insignificance compared with some of the rugged and torrid operations faced by the crews in the first months of 1944, perhaps none more so than the mission to Oschersleben on 11th January when a fighter assembly factory was the primary target. The Luftwaffe were able to put up their strongest force since the Schweinfurt raid of the previous October. The weather conditions badly deteriorated during the outward flight and the presence of high cloud, at times exceeding 28,000 feet, meant that few of the fighter escorts were able to locate the bomber formations.

The 401st was led by Lieutenant Colonel Allison Brooks and its aircraft had become isolated from the main formations, placing them in a most vulnerable position on which the Luftwaffe was quick to capitalise. The Group's gunners were soon desperately fighting off determined and sustained attacks by about 30 rocket-firing Me 110s, when suddenly out of the blue a solitary P-51 from the 354th Fighter Group of the Ninth Air Force arrived on the scene. The fighter pilot, Major James Howard, began to fight off the enemy aircraft single-handed. It was an amazing and brilliant bravura performance that lasted for about half an hour, which saved the Group from utter decimation. In the process Major Howard probably accounted for six enemy fighters. According to Brooks, 'It was a case of one lone American against what seemed to be the entire Luftwaffe.' Another crewman described it as 'like something out of a Hollywood movie.' It was largely as a result of the crews' reports that Major Howard was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, the only American fighter pilot in the European war to receive this highest bravery award. Nevertheless, the Group still lost four aircraft with another crash-landing at RAF Ludham on return, and seven were directed to Matlaske in Norfolk because of the unfavourable landing conditions at Deenethorpe. One B-17, *Nasty Habit*, overshot the runway and ended up only fit for salvage. Like the other Groups in the 15th Division, the 401st received its first and well-merited Distinguished Unit Citation.

Almost six weeks later the Group received a second Unit Citation for its crews' actions over Leipzig on 20th February when the five aircraft assembly factories at Mockau airfield were accurately and heavily bombed causing considerable damage and loss of production. On this

day the Group led the formations into southern Germany, with the crews managing to overcome adverse weather, fight through strong Luftwaffe resistance, accurately bomb the target and return to Deenethorpe with the loss of just a single aircraft. This mission was later described by General Williams, the Commander of 1st Division, as 'the most successful operation carried out so far by the Eighth Air Force.' Two days later, again in severe weather, the Division attacked aircraft factories at Bemburg, Halberstadt and Oschersleben, and it was over this latter target that the 401st had two aircraft shot down in the fierce fighter attacks, which on this occasion were estimated to be over 200 strong. The Division lost 38 B-17s (13%) on the mission with another three crashing on return to England. These two operations were just a part of the Eighth's massive assault on the German aircraft industry, which had been codenamed Operation Argument but became better known as the 'Big Week'.

It was not until March 1944 that the Eighth Air Force made their first strike at Berlin or 'Big B' as it was known to the crews. Frustrated by bad weather on three successive days (the 3rd to 5th) the first successful major mission was launched on the 6th, which also happened to be the Eighth's 250th operation of the war. Over 700



B-17F of 613th Bomb Squadron landing at Deenethorpe. (Smithsonian Institution)

bombers and some 800 fighters were engaged in what became a ferocious and sustained air battle, with the bomber crews facing almost 20 miles of heavy flak batteries on their run-in to Berlin. The 1st Division led the attack with the Erkner ball bearing plants as its primary target. The whole operation was conducted on a massive scale and in a grand manner but it proved to be very costly for the Eighth. However, the American press greeted it as a great victory with banner headlines exclaiming '800 US bombers smash at Berlin by day: 68 lost in battles, 123 of the foe shot down . . . 2,000 tons on German Capital . . . Fighters swarm on Nazis'. It was a brave and honest declaration by the USAAF of its true losses, which was quite a rarity considering the disingenuous nature of most wartime propaganda statements. In actual fact, 80 bombers and fighters were missing in action, the heaviest loss of the war for the Eighth, but just one came from Deenethorpe.

Berlin was bombed another three times by the Eighth during the month with the 401st losing only one further aircraft. Subsequently the Group would be in action over Berlin or nearby targets on another 13 occasions and it lost in total 14 crews or 15% of its total losses of the war. Indeed, the German capital and strategic oil targets accounted for a third of the Group's losses although they made up less than one-fifth of its total missions.

Throughout the war each Eighth Bomb Group experienced at least one disastrous day when its losses were well above the tolerable or acceptable level, and the Commanding Officer could only hope that such days were kept to a bare minimum. The 401st had their first really bad day on 28th May when the Ruhland oil plants were bombed by the Eighth for the first time. However, the 94th Wing was engaged over Dessau, some 30 miles due north of Leipzig, with its aircraft factories as the primary target. The Wing came under sustained and intense Luftwaffe attacks and 14 B-17s were shot down. The 401st lost six aircraft with another ditching in the sea but all the crew were saved, also a damaged B-17 was written-off after crash-landing on its return to Deenethorpe. Two days later the crews were back in the same area, this time to Oschersleben, the scene of the award of their first DUC, and another two crews went missing, which brought their total losses in the month to 14. The month of May proved to be a costly time for the Eighth Air Force in general and for the Group in particular.

At half past two on the morning of 6th June the crews at Deenethorpe were briefed for their impending mission. Colonel Bowman said at the briefing, 'Gentlemen remember this day - June 6th 1944. Remember it because your grandchildren probably will ask

you about it. This is D-Day.' By five o'clock, 36 aircraft had left the airfield to become part of the Eighth's heavy bomber force – some 1,800 strong – en route for the Normandy beach-heads. The sheer logistics involved in getting such a massive force assembled into formations and safely across southern England and the English Channel were complex in the extreme. Each of the three Divisions had their own designated air corridor to fly along; the 1st Division flew just to the west of London and crossed the coast near Brighton. The crews' specific targets were gun positions and strong points in the Gold 'area', which was one of the British forces' landing points. A second but much smaller mission left the bases about three hours later but only six crews from Deenethorpe were in action on this second wave. On that fateful and historic morning over 2,300 Allied heavy bombers were airborne with just a single aircraft lost to enemy action.

During this time there was a B-17G operating with the Group that was to gain lasting post-war fame in a somewhat indirect manner. The aircraft had been allocated to the 615th squadron and was named *Mary Alice* by its original pilot, Lieutenant Dan Knight, in honour of his mother. The aircraft received more major repair work and was patched up more frequently than most B-17s. One pilot commented that, 'She was put together like a jigsaw puzzle!' During its operational life two of its crew members were awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and the Silver Star – the second and third highest gallantry awards. On three occasions *Mary Alice* returned so badly damaged that emergency landings had to be made at Beccles, Boxted and the 'crashdrome' at Carnaby. Indeed at times *Mary Alice* appeared to be indestructible, perhaps an extreme example of the solidity and durability of the B-17.

Mary Alice flew its last and 98th mission on 19th April 1945. Despite all its history of damage the aircraft was still thought sufficiently airworthy to be ferried across the Atlantic after the end of the war and it finished its days, like hundreds of other B-17s, in the Arizona desert. Its post-war fame springs from the splendidly restored B-17G on display at the American Air Museum at Duxford. This aircraft was built in 1945 and delivered to the Eighth Air Force too late to see war service. It was subsequently acquired from France in the 1970s, and is now resplendent in the original colours and markings of *Mary Alice* – 231983 IY-G of 615th Bomb Squadron — a fine and lasting reminder of probably the most battered and damaged B-17 to survive the Second World War.

During July the 401st was in action on 17 days, mounting two separate missions to V1 rocket sites in the Pas de Calais on one day



Mary Alice on display at the American Air Museum at Duxford.

(6th). These were just short hops compared with most of the other operations in the month – Munich, Leipzig, Merseburg, Augsburg and Peenemunde – with Munich being visited on five separate occasions. However, on the 24th and 25th of the month the crews, like the rest of the Eighth Bomber Command, were detailed to bomb the Wehrmacht's strongly fortified positions in the area of Periers and St Lô in Normandy, which were blocking the US 1st Army's attempts to break out of Normandy. On the first operation over 1,500 heavy bombers were despatched but because of a persistent ground haze, only about a quarter actually bombed, and despite every care being taken 20 American troops were killed and another 60 wounded. Just three aircraft were lost. A damaged B-17 from Deenethorpe ditched in the Channel and eight of the crew were rescued. The following day there was a greater force in action, of which over 1,500 managed to bomb, but sadly American casualties on the ground were even higher than the previous day, almost 500, of whom 102 were killed. These two operations were the only serious blemishes in the Eighth's long bombing offensive.

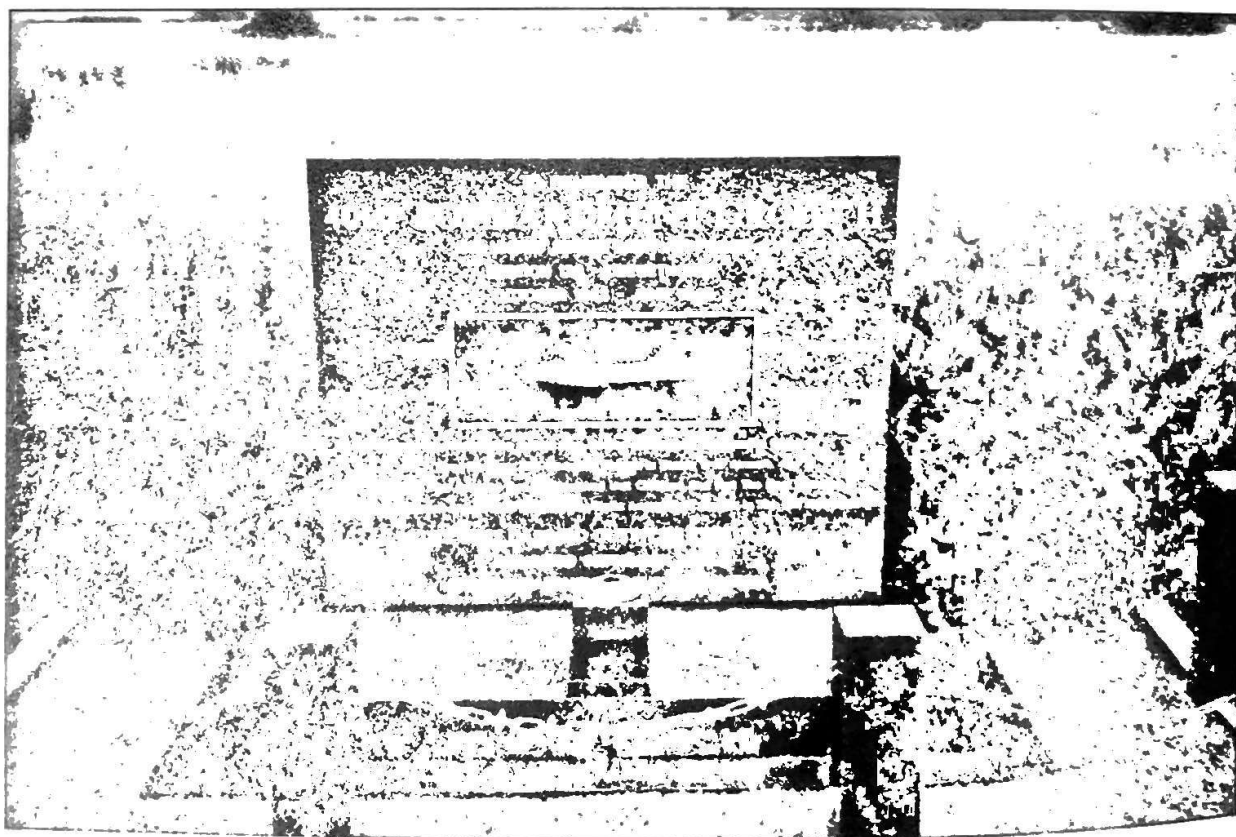
On 5th December Colonel Bowman left the Group to become General Spaatz's right-hand man, but he was replaced by an equally able Commander – Colonel William T. Seawell. Both men would reach the rank of Brigadier General in the post-war USAF, and Seawell later went

on to become the Chairman of Pan American Airways.

The 401st was passing through what could only be described as a 'purple patch'; since 6th November not a single aircraft had been lost in action, and the Group would ultimately complete 37 missions unscathed. This fine record came to an end on 3rd February 1945 over the Templehof railway yards at Berlin. One of its damaged aircraft force-landed in Poland though the crew was able to fly it back to England later in the month. It was during this period that the 401st passed its 200th mission mark and from early February onwards until the end of the war only eight B-17s went missing in action, three of these in one mission to oil targets in central Germany on the 16th of the month.

The heavy flak batteries that surrounded Berlin were still taking a toll of the Eighth Air Force even at this late stage of the war. The Group lost three aircraft over the German capital during this period, including one over Brandenburg, about 30 miles west of Berlin, on its 254th and last mission, which left Deenethorpe on 20th April. This was the 95th and last aircraft to be lost in action, a total which gave the Group the second lowest loss ratio of all B-17 Groups in the Eighth.

By the end of June all the B-17s had left and the ground crews had departed for the States on the *Queen Elizabeth* having originally arrived on the *Queen Mary*; not many American airmen could claim to have



Memorial to 'The Best Damned Outfit in the USAAF'.

DEENETHORPE

travelled on both the 'Queens'! The airfield was handed back to the RAF and Technical Training Command took it over, placing No 11 Recruit Centre there, who remained for about twelve months.

The main runway was restored during the 1960s by British Steel and used for the arrival and departure of VIPs visiting its steelworks at nearby Corby. The old control tower bearing the lettering 'Flying Control' survived until the early 1990s but sadly it has since been demolished. However, at the time of writing, the airfield is still used for private flying by C-10 Air Sport and the appropriately named Fortress Flying Club. As well as the fine memorial stone there is a stained-glass window in the church of St Mary the Virgin at Weldon, containing panels from the chapel of US Station No 128 - Deenethorpe - in memory of those men of 'The Best Damned Outfit in the USAAF'.