

Act of remembrance: A monumental new history of a Norfolk-based American bomber force represents the

In a higgledy-piggledy room that is a shrine to an enduring aeronautical passion Mike Bailey follows a familiar flightpath back to the roots of a grand obsession and a Norfolk transformed into an alluring Little America of shimmering dreams.

It is a mind's-eye journey that will be instantly recognisable to thousands whose childhoods were blighted and beguiled by a war that conspired to bring an intoxicating cocktail of anxiety and adventure into their austere lives.

Soaring beyond the desolate memories of homes reduced to dust and nights spent shivering with cold and fear in fragile shelters, it takes in the awesome sight of those vast aerial armadas that seemed to fill the sky with shards of silver before homing in on the kind of close-quarter experiences that last a lifetime.

Mike fixes the scene in an instant. It is the early summer of 1944 and an airfield on Norwich's northern fringes has been taken over by several thousand friendly invaders whose accents, behaviour and customs contrive to give even the humblest buck private the fleeting appearance of a movie star.

These are the men of the 458th Bomb Group whose Liberator air crews had been flying and dying on missions out of Horsham St Faith, near Norwich, since taking over the revamped and upgraded aerodrome in the March.

"I was 10 and me and my pal had found our secret way on to the airfield," says Mike as memories flood back into the small upstairs room filled with visual reminders of a past that has never gone away. "By cutting across a couple of fields, surreptitiously creeping along a hedgerow, always keeping a weather eye out for farmers, we managed to get on to the dispersal area of what we later found to be the 754th Bomb Squadron.

"We expected to be told to clear off but nobody seemed to bother about us and we found a vantage point on top of a haystack from where we got a good view of everything that went on."

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Nothing was off-limits. In time, they found their way aboard a parked Liberator, clambering into the cockpit, peering out of the Perspex nose and tinkering in the turrets. And all the time, from their haystack site, they witnessed the human dramas and tragedies of war being played out in front of their eyes.

"We saw aircraft taking off on missions, saw them returning, some damaged with wounded having to be extricated from the aircraft. We saw all there was to see," recalls Mike.

One incident among the many stuck out in his memory. It involved a Liberator called Dixie Belle which had aborted a mission with mechanical trouble, not that Mike knew any of that at the time.

"We were just sitting on our haystack with some off-duty mechanics when a B24 came zooming directly over the top of us," he says. "It wasn't aligned with any of the regular runways and because of the undulating surface of the airfield we lost sight of it as it disappeared over a slight hill.

"Suddenly, there was a big cloud of dust and the next thing we heard was the scream of ambulances and fire appliances tearing off to



Mike's mission of rememb

the scene of the crash. I often wondered why he didn't crash-land on one of the runways, but the full story is now in the book..."

The book is *Liberators Over Norwich*, a monumental history of the 458th Bomb Group crammed with anecdotes and photographs that represents the culmination of a 66-year odyssey and the fulfilment of a long-cherished ambition for the retired print worker who has devoted more than 40 years to chronicling the services of the 2nd US Air Division in books and paintings.

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"Despite all that had previously been written, I'd always felt there was room for an in-depth, week-by-week, month-by-month history that combined all the technical data, operational records and personal stories."

Even then, for all the fond hopes and long-held aspirations, the project might never have got off the ground but for a chance encounter in a Kansas City bookshop.

"Out of the blue," recalls Mike, "I got a phone call from the United States from a guy I'd never heard of called Darin Scorza who was in a state of great excitement. He'd found a book I'd done, called *Liberator Album*, and was interested not only because his dad had flown as a navigator in Liberators with the 458th, but because my painting on the cover featured his dad's actual aeroplane.

"He wanted to know if there was any special reason I'd selected that particular aircraft. Well, the truth was there wasn't. I just thought it had pretty good nose art."

The result was a commission for another painting of the same aircraft and the beginning of a fascination that would grow into a new trans-Atlantic alliance and an historical venture that has spanned three years and two continents.

"The whole thing sparked off something in Darin. He started researching his father's crew and their missions. That expanded into researching their squadron and the entire bomb group and, in so doing, an interest developed into, first, a hobby and then, as the things very often do, into an obsession."

Nominated by the 458th veterans as their group researcher, Darin set himself the task of gathering as many first-hand accounts and original photographs from their wartime service at Horsham St Faith as possible. A website followed and thoughts then turned towards that elusive book project.

"Darin had the research and the personnel photographs and I had hundreds of aircraft pictures which I'd collected over the course of the last 50 years, along with some 22 side view paintings I'd done between commissions. I could also supply the cover painting, but I hadn't the confidence or the time to write it, though I knew a man who could."

The final piece of the collaborative jigsaw was

fulfilment of an ambition born of a wartime boyhood. Steve Snelling charts one man's remarkable odyssey

Main picture: ANDY DARNELL



Salute to Little America: Left, aviation artist Mike Bailey has fulfilled a lifetime ambition by helping to bring to life the exploits of Liberator air crews of the 458th Bomb Group which flew out of Horsham St Faith, near Norwich. Above, Liberators over Norfolk; right, the wreck of the Belle of Boston at Frettenham; below right, Pappy Yokum nose down at Horsham; below, an air crew at Horsham – note the plane's colourful nose art.



rance accomplished

slotted into place when Mike recruited Scot Ron Mackay, a noted 8th Air Force chronicler whose previous works have included histories of the Hethel and Shipdham-based bomb groups, to the team.

And so to the story itself, a story that Mike had grown up with and lived with for all but 10 years of his life.

To anyone with a passing interest in the so-called 'Friendly Invasion' of East Anglia by units of the American 8th Air Force, the saga of the 458th Bomb Group will be a familiar one.

Raised in America in the summer of 1943 and commanded for the bulk of its operational career by the popular 29-year-old Jim Isbell, the Liberator group arrived in the winter of 1944 at Horsham St Faith from where it would fly 240 missions over the course of the next 15 months at a cost of 65 crews including 300 men killed on ops or in accidents.

These missions, all of them extensively charted by the group's trans-Atlantic chroniclers,

featured some of the most daunting sorties of the war, beginning with the attacks on the 'Big B', the aircrews' nickname for Berlin, and continuing via the tactical raids in support of the Normandy invasion through to the critical assault on the German oil industry.

In many ways theirs was a story typical of so many of the groups that made up the 2nd Air Division, their successes and disasters no better nor worse than the others. As Mike candidly put it, the 458th might be considered an "average group", though in this case "average" is no reflection on the level of courage or skill displayed by its crews but on the nature of their experience in combat and back at base.

There were, of course, distinctions that set them apart. For a start, they were unusual among the Norfolk-based US bomb groups in that they enjoyed the relative comforts of a former pre-war RAF station with brick-built barrack blocks in place of Nissen huts. And, on an operational level, there was their unique role in helping to pioneer the US air force's first

radio-controlled bombs with a system known as Azon which, though the results were rather patchy, may be seen as a notable forerunner to today's so-called 'smart bombs'.

"There were originally 10 Azon-equipped aircraft which were assimilated into one of the squadrons at Horsham," explains Mike, "and the idea was to use them against what were known as linear targets, things like bridges and other narrow structures. It was an early experimental guided bomb, but the atmospheric conditions in Europe, what with all the cloud cover and so on, were not ideal and the project was eventually abandoned here."

Azon aside, the 458th's war waged from the fields bordering villages that have all but been swallowed by Norwich's post-war sprawl was one of relentless effort attended by all the myriad dramas and tragedies associated with the greatest strategic bombing campaign in history.

And that proud record is most graphically illustrated in the rich and varied display of

photographs of crews and crashes, of the vast air fleets that provided so many Norfolk civilians with their abiding memory of the war and of the weird and comically-inventive nose art that seems even now to make a mockery of the life-or-death struggle in which the hundreds of young airmen were engaged in.

Together they complement perfectly the vivid recollections of countless veterans fortunate to survive some of the fiercest air battles of the war. Typical of them is the story of S/Sgt Glenn R Matson's eventful mission flown in March 1944 deep into enemy territory to bomb aero factories near the south German town of Friederichshafen.

His aircraft, named Paddlefoot, was badly damaged by heavy flak over the target, and the crew briefly contemplated diverting into neutral Switzerland before setting course for Horsham on a wing and a prayer.

Reaching Norfolk, with fuel almost exhausted and one engine "acting up", the bulk of the crew took up crash positions aboard the shot-up bomber, with the exception of the pilots and one crewman, Joe Tomich, who, inexplicably, "preferred to stand at the waist window".

What followed is best told in Matson's words: "The landing approach and initial contact with the runway was made at 100mph, but we were unaware that the right main landing gear tire [sic] had been punctured by the flak. Sure enough, when it touched the runway it flattened and the aircraft became uncontrollable, veering off the tarmac and on to the field.

"Unbeknownst to us was that Joe had jumped out of the right waist window as soon as the aircraft started on its rampage... It seemed like ages before we came to a stop. Before I could gather my wits, Sgt Webster and T/Sgt Vernon 'Red' Goring jumped over me and dove head-first out of a waist window; I was only a step behind however and I landed plumb on top of both.

"In our minds was the fear of the B-24 blowing up, so we scrambled to our feet and, on reaching a safe distance away, looked back for the others. All of them, except Joe, emerged from the nose section.

"Thinking he was still in the aircraft and unable to get out through being injured we started back. Suddenly Joe appeared, walking down the runway, his parachute in his hands and bearing a sheepish grin!

"As we stood there looking at our big, lame bird everyone agreed that it was a good landing simply because we had walked away from it..."

Others, of course, were not so lucky, as is testified in the harrowing array of wreck pictures. In one such incident, a Horsham-based B-24, Belle of Boston, came down at Frettenham just minutes after taking off for a raid on Brunswick. Of her crew of 10, six died instantly, but four survived thanks, in part, to the heroism of local haulier Ralph Hewitt who raced to the crash scene with a coat flapping over his long johns!

The story of the rescue, amid a hail of bullets "exploding and ricocheting everywhere", is recounted by Hewitt's son, Derek, who as a teenager joined him in a selfless endeavour that serves to underline the special links between local people and American airmen which have endured long after the war that forged them.

Such ties hold special meaning to Mike Bailey, for whom the book represents the conclusion not simply of a life's ambition but of a self-ordained mission of remembrance born out of the extraordinary sights and sounds experienced as a boy wilfully trespassing on fields of war that are now part of a remarkable trans-Atlantic heritage.

With his mission accomplished, he allows himself a self-conscious smile of satisfaction at a weight being lifted from his shoulders.

"I feel as though I can breathe one heck of a sigh of relief," he says before quietly adding: "You could say it's the end of a long, long journey."

Liberators Over Norwich: The 458th Bomb Group (H), 8th USAAF at Horsham St Faith 1944-1945, by Ron Mackay, Mike Bailey and Darin Scorza, is published by Schiffer Military History, priced £55.

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