

Home front odyssey: When Simon Baker turned house detective it helped unlock the door on Lowestoft's

It was a quest born close to home that has grown into a remarkable mission of remembrance. Not that Simon Baker ever planned it that way, still less imagined where his time-travelling odyssey might lead. In fact, as far as he can recall, the only thing on his mind the day it all began was cleaning his car.

The 41-year-old service manager for Yarmouth Borough Council had only just moved to 14, St Leonard's Road, Lowestoft, and as a layer of dust and dirt was washed into the gutter rather more murkier matters loomed into tantalising view.

"I turned round from the car and was looking at the house when I noticed something odd about it," he recalls. "The bricks on our house were a different colour to others in the street. It just got me wondering. And when I started to chat to our neighbour it all made sense. She said ours was one of the first houses in St Leonard's Road that was flattened during a wartime air raid and it just triggered something in my head. I wanted to know more..."

As a Lowestoft lad and an aviation enthusiast, he already knew a little about the coastal town's war history. A keen photographer, he'd even produced some pictures for a 'then and now' project to accompany images of bomb-ravaged streets. What he didn't know was the details, the myriad life-and-death dramas, that lay behind those grainy black and white photos. But he knew a man who did.

Bob Collis has been researching, talking and writing about East Anglia's wartime history for rather more years than he cares to mention. One of the region's most respected aeronautical sleuths, he is also a veteran aviation archaeologist and a trustee of Lowestoft War Memorial Museum who just so happened to have compiled a 12-page pamphlet outlining the air war over and around the port.

What he modestly called "a potted history of the principal aviation events affecting an East coast town in world war two" gave Simon his first insight into the tragic events of July 22, 1941 when, to quote the brief entry, "at 1.06am, 4 HE (high-explosive) bombs demolished 20 houses in St Leonard's Road and Lorne Park Road..."

More papers and reports fleshed out the story of that terrible night in South Lowestoft when a low-level raid resulted in damage to 400 properties and the deaths of 13 people, three of them Royal Naval Patrol Service seamen who were billeted in some of the houses that were bombed.

But far from resolving matters, the discovery served only to whet his appetite, though it took another 13 years and a couple more changes of address for the house detective to become a fully-fledged home front historian.

"About three years ago," he recalls, "I found the pamphlet Bob had written and thought it would be a good idea to update it. So much more information has come to light since it first appeared and I just asked him what he thought about revisiting the subject and it's just snowballed from there."

The result of their grand alliance is a minor publishing miracle in which the monumental achievement has been to squeeze a mountain of original research into a slim volume of 83 photo-packed pages.

The Air War Over Lowestoft 1939-1945 charts the truly epic story of how Britain's most easterly town found itself in the frontline of a relentless aerial campaign spanning almost five years and a staggering 105 raids.

By the time 'Wailing Willy', as Lowestoft's air raid siren was dubbed, fell silent at the end of April, 1945, 992 high-explosive bombs, 18,000 incendiaries and a number of V1 'flying bombs' had rained death and destruction on the borough to a degree that all but beggars belief – 192 civilians and 83 Service personnel killed, 731 injured and an incredible 9,433 out of 11,830 homes damaged.

Such grim and grisly statistics, however, tell only a part of this particular war story. As well as the bombs and bravery, there are 'friendly-fire' incidents and poignant sacrifices, not to mention a bizarre Italian intervention and an as yet unresolved mystery involving an unidentified German airman.

The breadth of this small book's focus is



Personal mission to piece together

matched only by the thoroughness of the research endeavours which stretch way back before the delayed impact of Simon's 1995 house move to the early 1970s when a young Bob Collis was first beginning to take interest in his home town's warring past.

At a time when his collaborator was barely out of nappies, he was already embarking on an historical journey that shows no sign of ending.

"I think it was hearing the stories of people who lived through those times that first fired my enthusiasm," says Bob. "There were a lot of people then whose recollections were very vivid and, of course, the signs of bomb damage, the fingerprints of war as I call them, were still visible and still are today to some extent."

"In a way, that's what inspired this book, but Simon's experience is certainly not unique. Take Denmark Road for example. There are four different locations here where you can see changes in the architecture, differences in the brick colouring, differences in the chimneys, or ragged lines in the walls where newer bricks are a giveaway to what happened around 70 years ago."

As a naval base that was home to the Royal Naval Patrol Service and a flotilla of Coastal Forces motor torpedo boats, Lowestoft, which began the war with only four Lewis guns to ward off the aerial threat, received a degree of bombing out of all proportion to its size.

"The town's pre-war population was approximately 44,000 but through evacuations and call-ups that fell to roughly half," says Bob. "But set against that there was a massive influx of military personnel, principally naval, who were billeted in homes and boarding houses with many public buildings being requisitioned by the military. All of which meant the Germans could claim to be bombing a legitimate military target."

"As a result of that, I think it's true to say that Lowestoft had more than its fair share of attention from the Luftwaffe. Yarmouth was in a similar position and also endured heavy bombing. In fact, Yarmouth actually had more bombs dropped on it, but Lowestoft suffered more casualties."

Most shocking of all the blows to befall the port was the infamous 'Waller's Raid' of January, 1942, when 71 people died, and which was followed by two devastating low-level 'tip and run' attacks on May 12, 1943, which resulted in the deaths of 32 people.

"The strange thing about those attacks was that bad luck played such a significant part in the heavy loss of life," says Bob. "The Waller's Raid, which was the blackest day of the war for Lowestoft, was carried out by a single aircraft at a time when nobody could really have anticipated an attack being made."

"It was in the fading light of a winter's afternoon, in the middle of a snowstorm, and

there hadn't been any raids on the town for almost three months. Yet that one aeroplane with four bombs caused the worst scenes of devastation Lowestoft witnessed during the entire war when they struck the main shopping area in London Road North with most of the fatalities occurring in a packed Waller's restaurant."

"The second piece of misfortune came during the raids carried out by FW 190 fighter-bombers. In the course of the first raid, in the early morning, a bomb had severed the cable linking the Royal Observer Corps post on Corton Road to the air raid alarm."

"When the second, heavier raid came in that evening, the observers spotted the aircraft two miles out to sea, but when they hit the switch to sound the alarm nothing happened. So instead of people being given a precious few seconds to take cover they were taken by surprise, some of them being caught in the open with deadly consequences in a raid that lasted barely 20 seconds but damage-wise was the worst of the war."

The names of all those who died in these fearful aerial bombardments, 33 of whom were seamen or Wrens, are listed in a roll of honour that represents the first attempt to publish a comprehensive record of the war's human toll taken of Lowestoft's combined civilian and military population.

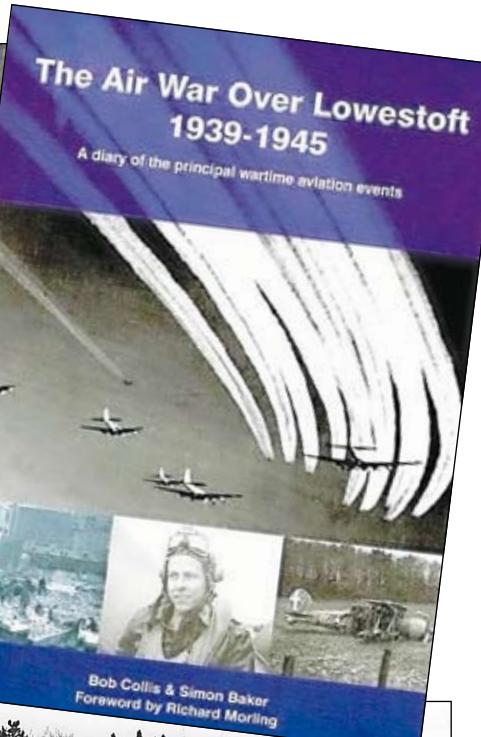
Its inclusion was Simon's idea and Bob admits

wartime record as one of the most heavily-bombed towns in Britain. Steve Snelling reports



Home front quest: Left, co-authors Simon Baker and Bob Collis outside the St Leonard's Road house in South Lowestoft where a wartime historical odyssey began. Above, the devastation after the 'Waller's Raid' of January, 1942 in which 71 civilians and Service personnel died. Below right, the Italian biplane that crashed at Corton.

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Life-and-death tales

■ One of the most extraordinary aerial encounters over Lowestoft featured the hapless Italian fighter pilot Antonio Lazzari. Shot up by Hurricanes over the North Sea during an ill-starred attempt to bomb Harwich, his CR.42 Falco biplane passed over Pakefield cliffs and Lowestoft's main street before force-landing in a field just north of Corton railway station. According to one story, Lazzari survived to charm the women in a local Naafi before being taken off to a prisoner of war camp. The 'spaghetti party' as it became known was a costly failure. In all three bombers and three fighters were shot down in the largest of the few air raids mounted by the Italian air force against British soil.



■ On May 11, 1943, a Dornier Do217E-4 bomber plunged into the sea, 300 yards off Ness Point, after being caught in the glare of a searchlight sited on Lowestoft seafront. Nineteen days later, the body of an unidentified German leutnant was washed ashore at Gunton and buried in Lowestoft cemetery's plot 522. The headstone bore the inscription: 'Ein Deutscher Soldat' (a German serviceman) and still does. For his identity has never been officially resolved, although all the evidence points to him having been the pilot of the lost Dornier, Eberhard Pleiss, pictured, who was flying his first operational sortie when he went 'missing' that night. Such is his family's conviction that he is Lowestoft's 'unknown German' that two sisters visited the grave to mark the 50th anniversary of his disappearance.

■ A number of businesses suffered more than once during the air raids on Lowestoft, but few could surpass the unenviable record of Richard Morling's family. Most of his father's shop was demolished in April 1941 with what remained of the store and its surviving stock being destroyed a month later. In between, the family home had been bombed. Having moved the business to London Road North, the new shop was promptly destroyed and his grandfather Ernest, three staff and three customers killed in the terrible 'Waller's Raid' of January 1942. Again, the business carried on at a new site, although, says Richard in a foreword to the book, "people were advised not to go to Morlings, as they got bombed!"

gather town's war-torn past



As it was: sailors from the town's naval base help clear the wreckage around the junction of St Leonard's Road and Lorne Park Road after the bomb incident 70 years ago.

he was initially dubious.

"My initial reaction was to ask him if he'd lost his mind," he deadpans. "I don't think he knew quite how big a list it would be or how hard a task it would be to research. You see, not everybody died when the bombs fell and nor did they all die in or near Lowestoft. A lot died from their injuries. There's one instance where there was a man who was injured in a raid in November 1940 who actually died as a result of those injuries in 1944."

Simon, however, persisted and both now agree that the effort to establish the exact number of air-raid casualties has been one of the most rewarding and most challenging features of the book.

Simon says: "It's true I didn't know what I was letting myself in for, but I just felt it was something we had to do. It's what you might call repaying a debt of gratitude, a chance to acknowledge their sacrifice. I wanted to pay tribute to all of them and, for me, it's probably the most important element of the book."

That said, two of the most tragic stories in the book that made the deepest impression on him feature men whose names do not feature in the roll of honour, by virtue of the fact that although they were victims of the air war they did not die as a result of German aerial bombardment.

One involved four members of the crew of a Feltwell-based Wellington that came down in

the sea off Corton after suffering engine failure 70 years ago and the other featured a 22-year-old American fighter pilot whose plane splashed down after running out of fuel returning from a mission.

"In the first instance," he says, "it was finding a photo of a training course line-up that caught my imagination. I recognised some of the names and was able to tie them to the crew of that Wellington, but what hit me most forcibly was the fact that the picture was taken in June or July 1941 and they died on July 14, so they must have been lost on one of their first missions."

The other story was no less poignant.

"It concerned 'Ward' De Canizares," says Simon. "Just reading about how he'd selflessly engaged German fighters on the way back from a mission knowing full well he'd run out of fuel was incredible enough, but then I stumbled across an article that had appeared in the New York Times. It was written by a journalist who was recalling as a boy visiting his grandfather's house on Friday evenings for supper.

American hero: "Ward" De Canizares sacrificed his life trying to save his comrades.

While the family were saying grace he'd sneak a look at his grandfather who'd be staring at a picture of a young pilot that hung above the fireplace. It turned out to be a photograph of 'Ward' De Canizares. He was the boy's uncle. It turned out that when his body was brought to land in Lowestoft to eventually lie in the coroner's office in Cambridge, his father was playing the organ at their church's Easter service.

"Reading all of that made me realise what the true meaning of loss was not just to his family but to all the other families who lost people in the air war over Lowestoft."

Years on from that discovery the legacy of his endeavour has plainly endured.

"It's really got me hooked," says Simon. "We're already planning a follow-up book that will focus on the raids with more personal stories and comparative 'then and now' pictures."

The epic odyssey on the trail of a conflict that ended 25 years before he was born goes on.



The Air War Over Lowestoft 1939-1945, by Bob Collis and Simon Baker, is published by Lowestoft Aviation Society, priced £7.