

# U.K. Memories

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The **JOURNAL** and group newsletters recount many fascinating, and too often tragic, stories of the men of the Second Air Division while on missions over enemy territory in Europe. Although the element of danger was comparatively absent on the English side of the North Sea, nevertheless incidents and encounters, both on and off the, add to the wartime picture. Not one to keep a diary at the time, I recently searched my memory bank to come up with a selection of random anecdotes of military life in England from December 1943 to July, 1945. Perhaps a few of these vignettes will bring back to others some similar recollections.

We are on our way by troop train from the Firth of Clyde to East Anglia, having arrived in the United Kingdom via the ocean liner Queen Mary. The train stops at a station, and the inevitable question is asked, "Where are we?" "We are in Bovril," comes the reply from one of our group. Standing at the far edge of the platform is a plain rectangular sign containing only the name "BOVRIL" in bold, black letters. Much later, another station, and an identical sign also reads "BOVRIL." "What a popular name for towns over here!" Eventually we learn that these one-word signs advertise a bouillon beverage product in competition with its rival Oxo. Well we did " just get off the boat."

Because of the war, the regular longer distance trains in England do not carry restaurant cars. However, all railroad depots of at least a moderate size have a tearoom. At these stops passengers en route pour off the train, swarm into the tearoom, and rush back to their carriages, each carrying tea in a china cup and saucer and a biscuit (cookie). At the next station stop no one carries a teacup back into the depot! No, the trains are continually hauling used teacups back and forth across the country. It must be a logistical nightmare to redistribute this chinaware equitably each day.

The squadrons' living quarters vary from base to base, but many are Nissen (Quonset) huts. Heating is from a single, small iron stove fed with rationed coke, never enough. Nearby in separate buildings are the unheated sanitary facilities. In a failed effort to avoid the dreaded trek from a warm bed into the frigid winter night for relief from the "G.I.'s" (diarrhea) which does occur occasionally, one suffers the misery of holding on as long as possible.

The unheated ablutions building, furnished with a row of showerheads, is quite distant from our hut. After several days while everyone grows riper, three or four of us decide to brave the cold room to take a warm shower. On the way back to the hut, congratulating ourselves on our cleanliness, one of our party had the misfortune to slip and tumble into a mud puddle, to no little amusement of the others.

The food in the base mess hall keeps starvation away but makes C-rations seem pretty good. The staple items day after day and month are powdered eggs, shredded corned beef (referred to as sloppy corn willie) from Argentina, all the Brussels sprouts that England can produce, dark bread (really good!), and barrels of that English favorite, orange marmalade. Some of the more imaginative cooks are able to make the powdered eggs palatable. The flight crews are treated to fresh eggs when they are available. The best treat though is to eat in the ballroom, converted to a dining hall run by the military, inside the Grosvenor House in London.

The Armed Forces Radio broadcasts provide diversion from the business at hand. Most of us tune in during off duty hours, A favorite is the swing band music served up by "The Duffle Bag" program with its theme, "Opus One," a rousing Tommy Dorsey Band number. However, our side does not own a monopoly on the airwaves. The Germans have several transmitters set up across the Channel to blanket the U.K. with its English- language broadcasts. Lord Haw Haw and his cohorts spew forth their propaganda in a futile attempt to demoralize us, but the enemy also plays the popular music of the day. The plaintive ballad "Lilli Marlene" becomes well known to us. Even the English latch on to this one, Anne Shelton giving it a slightly faster tempo.

The base air-raid sirens wail at dusk. We duck into the short, open-top revetments built on the ground surface. The drone of aircraft in formation grows louder. It is light enough to see directly above us the German markings on a motley, but deadly. Group of mixed types of aircraft, the best the Luftwaffe can do at this stage of the war. Our base stays quiet, and the planes fly on. But someone at the next base in their flight path fires up a stream of tracers – a big mistake! The formation apparently decides to abort its planned target, banks around, and in the distance we see and hear a profusion of explosions erupting at the unlucky base.

For Americans new to a war zone, an air raid over London is a tourist attraction, at least the first time. The sirens are our signal to rush out onto the street to see the searchlights, anti-aircraft bursts and bomb explosions, fortunately for us, not in our immediate vicinity. A warden discovers is in the blackout and tells us to move into a shelter. The Underground (subway) stations are major shelters. They are already crowded with the residents who sleep there every night; an unforgettable sight of masses of humans forced to live below a city under siege.

On a subsequent overnight trip to London, another officer and I are quartered in a Red Cross facility. We are the only males in the building when the sirens sound. We head down from the upper level only to find that the designated shelter for the building is the stairway ascending from the ground floor. And who do we find gathering on the steps? About a dozen young Red Cross women who have just arrived from the U.S. and are experiencing their first air raid. The poor souls look bewildered, so without hesitation we volunteer to calm and comfort them in their hour of anxiety. Is this good duty, or what? (Remember that women's lib has not happened yet.)

I have the opportunity to take an evening course at Cambridge University. The course title is "Life, People, and Government of the U.S.S.R." It seems to be an appropriate subject, because public education in the U.S. does not go much beyond western European history, and the Soviet Union is supposedly one of our allies in the war effort. What an eye opener to hear details of the bloody massacres perpetrated against friends and foe by Stalin to gain and hold power! Most shocking is the professor's justification of these atrocities as necessary to establish the new socialist state. Alarming, the young civilian students in the class absorb this communist propaganda without question.

King's Lynn is a popular destination for recreation on a one-day pass. But the military wants to maintain a certain decorum, so that troops don't have too good a time and offend the local residents. The Military Police are not staffed sufficiently for adequate street patrols so junior officers stationed at bases in the vicinity are assigned to this duty on a rotation basis. I'm sure the enlisted men are not exactly jubilant at having to salute patrolling officers, but there is retribution. The vastly outnumbered officers must engage in considerably more arm pumping to return many salutes all day.

D-Day. June 6, 1944 finally arrives. We work all day and night preparing our aircraft for the invasion support. As dawn approaches on the 6th, the sky is filled with a myriad of aircraft forming for their missions. It is an unbelievable panorama of seemingly endless waves of planes, a sight which will probably never be repeated. Our base puts up three missions during the day. A respite between missions comes at noon, and I catch a few winks while resting on a pile of lumber near a hardstand despite the bright sun-shining overhead.

The showers in the ablutions (washroom) buildings do an acceptable job, but soaking in a tub would feel nice once in a while. One way to accomplish this is to check into a hotel in Norwich for a night. Coins are inserted, and hot water is drawn from the geyser (a small, metered, water heater. Ah, luxury, submerged in a deep tub. Oh, oh! There go the air raid sirens. Get out of the tub and go to a shelter? Not after all this preparation! Sweat it out. The crude motor of the V-1 (pilotless flying bomb) gets louder as it continues to approach. Fortunately, it flies over before the motor quits and it begins a downward slide toward a potluck target.

Meanwhile, German scientists and engineers are working diligently at Peenemunde to apply American basic rocket-science knowledge, which our government has ignored, toward the development of long-range ballistic missiles. The outcome, late in the war, is the V-2. We in the ranks are blissfully unaware of the existence of such a weapon as we break for lunch in the mess hall one sunny day. About two thirds of the way through eating, we are startled by a loud explosion outside which shakes the building, showering dust from the rafters onto the remains of our meals. We rush out to find a crater in the ground in an open area. No one is hurt, and there is no structure near the hole. There was no air raid siren, no noise of a V-1. Everyone is baffled until at a later date news of the V-2 becomes public. We have the dubious distinction of being among the first to experience the receiving end of a V-2 before they are aimed at London.

The Air Force maintains specialized training facilities at various locations in the U.K. I attend an automatic-flight-control equipment course at a base near Blackpool. Toward the end of the sessions, the instructor informs the class that a short course will follow on the C-1, autopilot, formation stick installation. I request orders to remain for the autopilot instruction, and approval is granted.

A side benefit is a free evening between courses to take the train to Blackpool. This is a famous seaside resort on the Sea with trams (streetcars), built to resemble boats, locomotives, etc. running along the shore. The main attractions are the extensive entertainment pavilions. One pays a single entrance fee to use the amusement rides and other amenities. The pavilion I enter includes a large dance hall with a live orchestra. Couples are enjoying dancing, but many unescorted young ladies are standing by. As I walk around the perimeter of the dance floor, I notice some of the same faces, always only a few feet away. Obviously, they want to be asked to dance, but they are not so bold as to do the asking. Etiquette survives.

General Patton's tanks are racing across France, and ground supplies of fuel cannot keep up with them. The Air Force comes to the rescue. The B-24's bomb bays are fitted with special tanks to carry the 80-octane gasoline needed. The aircraft I fly with on one of these delivery missions roars down the runway, the overflow fuel streaming from the wing tanks, too close to the out-board engines for comfort.

Once airborne, the cargo flight over the North Sea and into France is uneventful. The delivery point is St. Quentin. Returning to England is another matter. Our radio goes out. We become temporarily lost above the clouds, perilously close to the area where British anti-aircraft gunners shoot first and ask questions later. Not to worry; our navigator puts us on course back to East Anglia, and all's well that ends well.

After V-E Day, May 8, 1945, the bombardment groups prepare for a return to the U.S., and our U.K. experiences come to an end.