

Pilote de bombardier, stationné à Polebrook, Wally Hoffman bénéficie de trois jours de permission, à la suite du raid du 14 octobre sur Schweinfurt. Il les passe à Londres, avec tout son équipage, et nous confie ses impressions sur l'Angleterre en guerre.

WE VISIT LONDON

par Wally Hoffman



I wake up with a bright warm light shining in my face, but this time it isn't our tour director with his casual invitation to breakfast. As I join the land of the living the pieces slowly come together. I can see it is daylight and for a change the sunshine is streaming in through the window. Wonder of wonders as I look out the all I see is bright sunlight with no rain or clouds. Then the penny dropped as I remember we aren't flying today, we are off any loading for five days. In theory we are supposed to fly one day and be down two or more days, however this never works out because of battle damage to planes, and the availability of crews. I look over at some of the empty beds and think about bloody yesterday. The reports were over 60 some planes lost over Europe and 5 over England, which means an additional 650 empty beds this morning in the 8th Air Force.

I muse over the battle of yesterday in the skies over Germany with everyone's maximum efforts of placing our bombs on Schweinfurt. I can still see the flaming planes, the parachutes, contrails, explosions and smoke, plus the charred bodies. The flak and bullet riddled planes as we struggled home to our field here in England. Today there will be no punishment of the long hours at sub zero temperature, and breathing oxygen in the uncomfortable oxygen mask because of the thin rarefied air. The next five days is ours to do what we want.

During breakfast (no fried eggs today, only spam and the leather powdered eggs), we were advised we could get 3-day passes. We wondered whether it was they felt sorry for us or was it no airplanes that could still fly. But we weren't going to argue the point.

Before picking up our passes we proceeded to the Base Chaplain's office to check on the info for going to London. They could tell what trains to catch and where to stay. There existed a very comfortable relationship with the Base Chaplains. To me this was one of the finest groups of unsung heroes during the war. They always let you approach them on your terms as they had a fine sense of our feelings. They were the ones who insisted we be given leave, and probably had more insight as to how effective we could perform than the Flight Surgeons. These same men flew missions so as to better understand what kind of a world we were living in, and the trauma we were experiencing. They of course all had a key interest in your soul but the primary consideration was our spirit, in looking back now they were always there for us. I believe in a "Supreme Being", but am not a deeply religious person. I still distinctly remember on that mission at the height of the air battle when it seemed as if we could take no more of uttering "Oh Lord My God Is There No Help" and distinctly hearing a voice saying "TRUST ME". I knew we were not alone in that plane.

I have seen a Protestant Chaplain give last rites to a Catholic crewmember who was about to die, as there was no priest available. The following is a letter one of our Chaplains wrote of his experiences with the Group, which gives an insight to these dedicated men.

The Rev. Thomas B. Richards was appointed as Chaplain to the 351st Bomb Group on November 1942, and served with the Group throughout the war returning to the United States in June 1945, and finally being discharged in July 1945. He returned to his former position as Chaplain of the US. Penitentiary at Lewisburg, PA, for a further two years before moving to Rochester, NY to assume the Directorship of the Men's Service Center Halfway House, where he remains to the present time. He has also lectured, taught, and held consulting posts at the University of Rochester, Rutgers University, and the Strong and Genesee Hospitals. The holder of a Masters Degree from Rochester University, and a Doctors Degree from Bucknell University, he still lives in Rochester NY. Our thanks to Rev. Richards for this charming paper in which he reflects on his days at Polebrook.

"It's hard to look back. I find that I have been putting it off. I've been telling myself that I would go the attic one of these days and rummage through the old letters and records and materials relative to the old 351st. I have finally done so, and those two years at Polebrook have come alive again.

I was one of the first few officers assigned to the original cadre of the 351st in Spokane, WA, in the early summer of 1942. I remained with the Group throughout the war, from training in the states into combat and back home again. I had a total experience, as a Chaplain, and one I shall never forget. I know many of our ground and flying personnel intimately; I got to know their wives and families; carried on correspondence with the people back home, and in some cases, had the sad task of "lying them to rest with honor" as the war carried through to its ultimate conclusion.

I have not forgotten the many who "paid the ultimate price", and I still feel a deep sadness when I think of them, to realize that they have been dead all these years, and the rest of us have been spared to live out our lives in a reasonable normal fashion.

So, it's good to think of those days at Polebrook - good for the soul - and it should make us doubly grateful that we are still here to tell about it. I think of the early morning briefings, the hot coffee and the powdered eggs, the aborted missions, the missions I flew as an observer, the little chapel that was always crowded on Sundays, the dances at the enlisted and officers clubs, our English guests, Clark Gable's entourage (he made us famous and ruined our security), the services I conducted for the British airmen at the Rothschild convalescent mansion nearby, the people I married and; the people I should have married, the MIAs and the KIAs (missing in action & killed in action), the cold English winters and those miserable pot bellied stoves, my capable and loyal clerk, Sgt. Mancke, and my organist, Capt. McCutcheon, the weather officer...It goes on and on, but now that I've started, I'm not going to stop now! I think of the bicycles and skinned shins, my uncomfortable jeep, and the many beer runs I made to a brewery outside of London (in the line of duty), the terrible cold in the waist of a B17 when we poked our 50 caliber's out at the attacking fighters, the frightening rocking and shuddering of the plane as it made its way through the flak, the assembly at the control tower to count the returning planes, the countless visits to quaint little towns all over England on behalf of the personnel who wanted "permission" to marry (the CO had to give his OK, but I had to do the investigating), the time we marched into the Peterborough Cathedral and I preached the sermon, the 48 hour passes and the 7 day leaves, the hospitality of the Scotch people, the flying bombs that first terrorized London, the high price in barter of a few country fresh eggs, the brussel sprouts, the dark bread, the robust Land Army girls, and the first time I saw a B29, and the realization that we had the most dependable, and the real workhorse of the air war, in the B17.

I think of Billy Conn's boxing show in the large hangar, those long walks on the perimeter to visit the ground crews, the cable announcing my first born, which failed to mention the sex.

I think of the beautiful little pub in Oundle and the good friends at the Oundle School, the vicar at the Polebrook Parish, the wedding we solemnized there in company of the better part of the 508th Squadron.

I think of those many trips to the air force cemetery outside of Cambridge, the sinking feeling as I saw those crosses grow and grow in number, the German boy prisoners on burial detail, and the letters we wrote to the folks back home.

I think of the musical comedies which could be seen in provincial English towns during the war, I think of the tea time in Coventry in a bomb-blasted shop with the wind blowing through without impediment (testimony to English character), those marvelous little English London Jitneys, the Red Cross Club in London, and my failure to salute a two star general and the lecture he gave me!!

I think of the heavy losses we suffered early in the war, how things improved when we got longer range fighters, the respect we had for the German air force, and how we marveled that the Spitfires had been able to save the Island, that little patch of green.

I think of the beauty of the English springtime, the lush green of the countryside, the castles, the pubs, the churches, the indomitable people --indomitable people.... Come to think of it, it was quite an

experience, and something to live through! They tell me things have changed, but I'm sure "there will always be an England"...

We all decide to go to London as a crew. Being naive we picked up passes to go to London, and made our way back to quarters to change into our uniforms and pack our gear. Showered and with our shoes shined we changed to our class A uniforms which smelled slightly of aviation fuel from our own cleaning efforts. The quarters were full of advise about London. "Man, them Piccadilly Commandos will give you such a dose it will peel your jewels right off you." A gunner from Chicago warned us cheerfully. "Just keep those 'French letters' that's is what the Limey call them - handy and you will be alright. Don't worry if you run out it's easier to get a condom in London than a bar of soap. Even the newspaper boys on the corner sell them. I wouldn't be surprised if they didn't sell them with fish and chips" he chuckled. We had all heard many stories about the wild and wicked London, with all the pubs, the cavernous dance halls, the hotels with real sheets and warm baths. Then there were the girls---The Piccadilly Commandos and the Hyde Park Rangers who prowled the streets turning tricks in doorways or under park benches. There also nice girls, who after dinner and drinks and dancing hopefully might invite you home for a weekend away from war.

We proceed to the main gate catching the ancient bus to Peterborough for the afternoon express to London, which was jammed. GIs poured from the train platform into the ancient train swamping it even spilling over into the corridors. The conductor's whistle blew and with a cloud of steam the train slowly pulled out from the station. The ochre and green landscape that was England slid by and after about two hours the rural countryside began to melt gradually. The clusters of stucco cottages along the track thickened into settlements spreading almost to the horizon. Then the train plunged suddenly into a series of short tunnels rose again gently and braked gliding to as steamy halt. We were in steel canopy of Kings Cross Station in London. As soon as we were off the train we could hear the shrieking of the air raid sirens and were quickly herded into the many areas of the Underground (subway), as there was an air raid in progress.

Here we are trying to get away from air raids and find ourselves in the middle of one! We only heard some dull booms and felt some shaking. The worst was the mass of people who very stoically stood around and waited for it to end and then be on their way. It was apparently old stuff to them, and soon someone started to sing "Roll Out The Barrel" with everyone joining in. "Come Yank" get singing! How fast that hour passed.

We did get some excellent instructions of where to go and what to see. The directions were something else. In addition to trying to understand the "Cockney" accent was their directions were far different than what we were used to: "When you come out of the "Underground" bear left and go to the Chip Shop, then cross the street and follow that street until you see the "Old Spoon" Pub, and so on. This was always ended by "YOU CAN'T MISS IT". We were used to directions using street names and for so many specific blocks, so we were as confused as when we had asked the question. While we were leaving the station many of the children came up to us and ask "Any Gum Chum".

We made it to an "English Pub" which is a social place and described as "Everyone's Home away from Home". It is a "British Institution" and cannot be created outside of its native land because the people who drink there make a pub. "The Local" is an organic part of the community, and the "Regulars" seem to continually prop up the bar.

We lined up for a beer, which we knew, would be warm, but not as warm as the hospitality of the patrons. They soon discovered we had taken part in the mission to Schweinfurt, which was in today's London papers. Everyone bought us a drink, and we had not yet learned to say: "Same Again" which was a custom to return the drink. We always found the English people were very cordial to us and treated us as visitors who came to help in the war effort. The Royal Air Force personnel were also quite congenial, however the other branches of service had the basic attitude of "Over Sexed -Over Paid -and Over Here". Our pay scale was about twice that of the English Military, which they always resented as we were all doing the same thing, plus the habit many Americans have of leaving their change on the bar. This to the English was showing off.

Of course we had a lot of "Bastards" who felt if it wasn't American or American made it wasn't any good. They could be found in any Pub bragging very loudly that they had come over to finally win the war for the British. Of course someone once said the British and the Americans are two people

separated by a common language. We all found out soon enough what that meant. Trucks are "lorries", flashlights are "torches", and the movies are the "Cinema". There are also things you shouldn't say in polite company, such as a "bum" isn't a panhandler; it is something you sit on. Another item are some of the weird sounding phrases. If they suggest "to send someone to knock you up" don't be shocked, it is to wake you up in the morning. Another phrase "keep your pecker up", it isn't what you think it is. Other things like driving on the left side of the road, and having the money based on an impossible system, which doesn't seem to make any sense. Of course there is the warm beer. You soon realize these are the things, which are England, just as we look at baseball, jazz and Coca-Cola. You look and listen before you start to tell the British how much better we do things. They do want to hear what life is really like, as most of what they know is only the "Hollywood Version" of wild Indians and gangsters. We came to Britain where our homes were safe with no one dropping bombs on them night after night, food is plentiful, and the lights are on. The people may look a bit dowdy, however they have been taking it since 1939, and all of Britain is a war zone. Everything is rationed, all clothes and food. The food ration for a week is 4 ozs. of bacon or ham, every 4 weeks 16 ozs. Of jam or marmalade, 8 ozs., of fats (4 ozs. must be margarine), 8 ozs of cheese, and 16 ozs of hard soap. I always felt somewhat reluctant to accept invitations to dinner unless I could contribute to their rationed lives by taking food with me or ration coupons. All clothes are rationed and wearing old clothes is considered good form.

Approximately 146,740 British civilians died from bombing, which had gone on night after night. The whole of Britain, which includes England, Wales, and Scotland, is hardly bigger than the state of Oregon. Each man guards his/her privacy, and is equally careful not to invade another one's privacy. Sitting on a train with you without striking up a conversation doesn't mean they are being haughty and unfriendly. They are paying more attention to you than you think, but don't want to appear intrusive or rude. The British dislike bragging and showing off, but like your frankness as long as it is friendly. They are interested in what it is really like in America, but don't tell them how much better we do things.

There was usually someone sitting at the piano playing the songs like ("Roll Out the Barrel, Lili Marlene, I've Got Sixpence, Bless' Em All, Kiss Me Goodnight Sergeant Major, We'll Meet Again, The White Cliffs of Dover, When the lights Go On Again, etc.") with all the pub singing along. They say these are the songs that won the war.

It seemed no time at all until the "Landlord" put a bar towel over the beer pumps, and in a very loud voice said, "It's Time, Gentlemen" and everyone gulping the last dregs from their glass. We found that all British Pubs were on a very strict time schedule of a few midday hours and then usually from 5:30 to 10:30 in the evenings. We exchanged names with our newfound friends and ask how to get to "Rainbow Corner" the Red Cross Center we had been advised as a good start to find a place to stay.

Two of the Locals offered to guide us there after we explained the trouble trying to understand their directions. As we left the Pub we found ourselves somewhat unsteady on our feet, what had appeared as warm watery beer really had a kick leaving us feeling if we had been slugging down mixed drinks. English beer runs about 8% as against our 3.2%.

We proceeded up one street, cut through kind of an alley, and in no time none of us had any idea where we were or what direction we were going - the next thing we were there. The Red Cross had space for us so we checked in. They gave each of us a worn towel and a small piece of soap, and told us the showers are upstairs and down the corridor. I made my way upstairs and stood in the shower for a long time in the luxury of the warmth of the room with warm water coursing over me. As I looked around there were other men in the shower standing languorously beneath the hissing shower heads lost in that strange inner solitude produced by a prolonged lack of privacy. With these pleasant sensations we made our way to our assigned beds. With all the excitement and the alcohol nobody was awake very long. The next morning we were up and at 'em to see all these things we had read about in the history books : Westminster Abbey, St. Pauls, Big Ben, Houses of Parliament, Trafalgar Square, and of course Piccadilly Circus.

In the daylight as we made our way to see "Big Ben" which is symbolic of London and one of the most patriotic sounds as it strikes the hour. Shortly before striking the hour it plays a short melody known as the Westminster Chimes in the clock tower of the Houses of Parliament. We also saw the terrible destruction of the bombing raids. News pictures could not show blocks of nothing, burned out skeletons of buildings, a wall standing here with a bathtub dangling down, and looking directly into

someone's bedroom as there was no wall. We had heard about the bombings, but were not prepared for such total destruction, and held nothing but admiration for the English people continuing on in the face of such calamity. We were soon looking up at Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament as it struck the hour. The thought occurred to me that huge old clock was saying, "Hey, I'm still here, you haven't beat me yet".

I can still remember as many others of our age group the Edward R. Murrow broadcast "This is London Calling" and hearing Big Ben chiming in the background. This to me was seeing history as we then proceeded on toward the "Houses of Parliament". I can remember seeing pictures from the books in school of all these things.

Of course "Piccadilly Circus" was something else, and we soon heard "'owbout it love, around the corner for a pound?" A voice cooed to us from nearby as we passed. Which revealed a parted overcoat revealing a very short skirt and a pair of nice legs in high heels. They were everywhere, the Commandos, wandering the streets, waiting in doorways, hovering at the entrance to the underground, plying their trade. When you took a good look at them, none of us were that desperate.

By now we were all ravenous, and there in front of us was a Fish and Chip Shop, which was frying (because of the lack of fish, many such shops were not always open). The fish was cod and dipped in a batter I have never seen duplicated here and done to perfection, the chips (french fries) were golden brown, and the whole lot was wrapped in newspaper, which seemed to add to the flavor. You ate as you walked and I'm still convinced the newsprint had something to do with the unique flavor. The English usually put vinegar (malt) on both the fish and the chips. We then looked for a Pub, and found they are all closed until about 5 or 6. We didn't learn about the "Off License" (a small store which sells bottled liquor) until later.

We managed to stop a taxi and all of us managed climbed in to go to Westminster Abbey. This is an inspiring building and huge. It seems to throb with the pressure of humanity both present and past. As you enter you are struck with the beauty and the architecture especially the stained glass windows. You stare at the congregations of white marble figures, some of them frozen in unnerving positions. I believe all of us felt the sacred sanctity and were walking on hallowed ground as we walked over the British heroes buried in the floor. There are many parts and chapels to the Abbey and many areas were closed to entry, and to see it all would take more than a day.

We decided we would return to the Pub we had been in last night, however no one remembered the name or where it was located except it was between Charring Cross and the Rainbow Center. I remembering thinking we are 10 men who a year ago did not know even each other and are now bound together as a unit. We were all common ordinary people from all walks of life who had been immediately thrust into life threatening emotions. There had been thrust upon us in a very short time a limited technical and emotional preparedness for what we were doing to win this war. All of us felt our own way life had been threatened with everyone jumping in to get the job done so as to get on with our lives. We were well aware we were our youth, but with no regrets. All of us were now well acquainted with fear. Knowing full well the specter of death continually hovered over all of us on a daily basis. She seemed to be patiently waiting for the proper time to gather us to her bosom for that trip to an unknown country from whom no traveler returns. You could feel the camaraderie that had developed between men of totally different backgrounds and personality.

We soon all piled on to a double decker bus and ask the attendant about the pub. She told us there must be 50 pubs between Charring Cross and the Rainbow Center. She would tell us where to get off and if the pub sounds noisy try it out. The attendant soon beckoned to us and we all piled off. We soon found ourselves in a repeat of the pubs from last night. People kept telling us to go to the dance hall at Covent Gardens. How we made it there I don't know, but there it was. It was filled with foxtrotting couples moving as if in formation around the crowded floor. The orchestra was an imitation of Glen Miller/Tommy Dorsey, and really quite good. There was the RAF blue, American olive drab, Canadians, Australians, French, Land Army Girls, WAAF, Wrens [women royal naval service], Civilians, and you name it. An American Red Cross Girl asks "Pappy" (the oldest member of the crew) to dance, and believe or not he accepted. Soon we were all dancing, because if you weren't someone was sure to ask you. We all danced, chatted, and watched and what a memorable time. It was late

when we left after exchanging addresses and telephone numbers from partners we knew we would never see again.

The next morning we were hung over, and the breakfast of kippers, powdered eggs and weak coffee didn't help too much. There was no agreement of where to go on this last day, so we all agreed we would meet at the Kings Cross station to catch the train back to Peterborough at 1800 under the clock, (so did everyone else).

Eddie (Navigator) wanted to have lunch at "The Savoy" and I agreed to come with him, if he would also go to Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum. Eddie was the youngest on the crew, and somewhat timid, but we all had a hand in helping him grow up. The night on the town must have changed him as he walked into the Savoy as if he owned the place going past the doorman, and charged to the head of line waiting to get into the restaurant. I was still blinking in amazement when we were immediately seated. We were stunned at the prices, but were in for a pound so what. I can't remember the food being any better than anywhere else, but the wine was delicious. We then found the Wax Museum, which I can remember vividly to this day how real all the models looked including Hitler and Churchill. I have been in several wax museums since, but none have left that impression on me. We then proceeded to the "Ye Olde Curiosity Shoppe" not without difficulty in finding it. I can still remember the narrow winding stairs, but no one seemed get in each other's way.

Time had gotten away from us and we made a mad rush by taxi to make it back to the Kings Cross Station. When we arrive it seemed everybody else had agreed to meet under the clock. Plus finding there was more than one clock. We eventually found everyone and had to run to catch the train. Soon we were all asleep, and the next thing I knew "Pappy" was shaking me to wake up as we were in Peterborough and the next stop was Leeds. We managed to get everyone awake and in a stupor off the train, but some of us had misplaced our tickets. The guard finally let us through shaking his head at the "Yanks". We were starved and found a restaurant open under the bridge, which was serving spam, eggs (powdered), and chips. Oh, how wonderful they tasted although the thought of them today I wouldn't touch them.

Arriving back at the base we were all exhausted, but what a wonderful feeling of getting away. We never again went on leave together although many times we would pair up and go different places. Later I was to go with Bill (Ball Turret Gunner) to Blackpool where I met my wife.

Wally Hoffman, Dec. 2001