

History of the Tower Museum

I first became involved with the old Control Tower at the former airfield at RAF Bassingbourn (Station 121) in July 1973, when David Crow invited me along with six other members of the former East Anglian Aviation Society (EAAS) to inspect the Control Tower with a view of turning it into a Museum. David had spoken to the then Commanding Officer Lt Col Piggens, MBE. Royal Regiment of Fusiliers to seek his permission. It was agreed the project would go ahead. The Control Tower or Watch Office as it was originally known. The Control Tower was unique and I know of only one other in England similar. It was built in three stages with one modification to the 1st floor in 1941. The next change was after World War II. (W.W.II) when the RAF came back in the late 1940's, a glass house was added to the top of the 1st floor. This was a look out for Met Office. Later the Control Tower became known as the Met Office.

I was asked to become the Museum Curator. I was then Chairman of the Shuttleworth Veteran Aircraft Society that had at that time 1200 members. I had to make a choice, so choose the Tower Museum. As the EAAS was a limited company to protect its members from being potential legal action, I became a Director and was one of the original signatories to its constitution.

EAAS was rebuilding a twin engined De Havilland Rapide so a moratorium was imposed on spending so little progress was made. A start was made to collect artefact relative to RAF Bassingbourn during the stay of the Royal Air Force & the 91st BG(H). David Crow had some photographs of the 91st BG(H) and the 1st floor having a desk type platform the width of the building it was an ideal place to display them. David also has the original sign post relating to RAF Bassingbourn along with other artefact. The first visitor I remember was John Hardin who arrived one Sunday morning. The late Allan Burford an enthusiast 8th Air Force historian took John and his wife round the Museum and the airfield. The next 91ster was Elwyn Bloodgood the brother of 1st Lt William Bloodgood who was killed on the 30th December 1942 on the mission to Lorient, France. I remember Elwyn telling me that 91ster's thought he was his brother returning, as both were in the 401st BS.

William & Virginia McGavern were also one of the early visitor's to the Museum and we took them round to William's old hard standing. Bill and Virginia stayed at the Banyers in Royston and asked me to go back to the hotel with them, where they gave the Museum's his A2 jacket.

The Army were extremely kind to me throughout my term in office at the Museum. There was no signed agreement just a gentleman's agreement that worked very well. Various Quartermaster's over the years were always willing to help with the odd tin of paint, a few nails or screws and wood. The Barracks was a place where the soldier lived with their families, it was their home and they worked there, so I along with other members of the EAAS we respected the privilege we had of being civilians entering an active military barracks. To the best of my knowledge no other civilian group at that time in England had this entitlement. Where else would a Museum have a 24 hour guard for free? Eventually we were given passes to enter the Barracks which saved us much time booking in and was indeed a privilege.

The first large group of 91sters to visit the Museum I can remember was June 20th 1974 when David Crow organised the dedication of the Prop Memorial having obtained a Boeing B-

17 propellor from Sudan which was flown to England by Squadron Leader Monty Burton. This was followed by a concert given by the Syd Lawrence Orchestra who played the Glen Miller sound music in "C" Hangar. The compere was Allan Dell, who at the time has a radio show on the BBC called "BIG BAND SOUND". The icing on the cake was the presence of June Allyson the actress with her husband. I had the pleasure of showing her round the Tower Museum. She was charming. The autograph hunter's were very prominent as were those wishing to have their photographs taken with Miss Allyson. David Crow has always has the ability to organise such promotions and it was a wonderful day. Sadly, shortly afterwards David left EAAS as his wife Valerie had cancer.

American airmen from RAF Mildenhall had visited the Museum a few months before the arrival of the 91st BG(H) Memorial Association and they were very good modeller's. They produced several P-51's and P-47's, fighter's models that became the start of the room that was called "The Little Friends Room". Two of the American airman were boom operators on KC -147 tankers which are still based at RAF Mildenhall today (2012). My wife Margaret painted the background to one diorama and we needed some curtains. We had some old yellow ones and decided to dye them black. They came out olive drab which was most appropriate. While doing the diorama it was my first experience of an alleged ghost. I often had to give a talk in the Officer Mess on Ladies night. I mentioned the ghost story and the then Colonel's wife turned to her husband and said "You must get the Padre to put the poor man to rest". He did. Bing Price a former pilot with the 355th FG at RAF Steeple Morden was very supportive and gave us a donation which helped with the "Little Friends" room. He was Director of Forward Planning at the Vauxhall plant in Luton, a GM company.

More 91sters now started coming back to Bassingbourn and I recall Joanne Thompson the wife of Sgt Gerald Gillies who was killed on the mission to Caen, France on the 8-8-1944 returning along with her friend, after having dinner with us I was able to give her a wooden plaque of her husband's aircraft "Chow Hound". Bill Admans had carved several plaques for the Museum. Bill Read, Squadron Commander of the 322nd BS who told me how he and Manny Klette had jeeps by their aircraft after a mission and then raced each other round the peri-track, the losers paying for drinks in the mess. Wayne "Tex" Frye had a staff officer sleeping in the bunk above him who came in late at night while "Tex" and his colleagues were trying to get some sleep for the mission next day and dropped his boots on the floor. "Tex" warned him but he did not listen. So "Tex" removed the head of a bullet leaving the cap in the shell case and when the officer dropped his boots "Tex" fired the blank. The officer got the message.

A 91ster radio ham was on the air with a gentleman in Cambridge who stated that he (91ster) had a girl friend in Cambridge during his stay at RAF Bassingbourn who happened to be the gentleman in Cambridge wife. This foursome came to see us at the Museum. Several 91sters came back more than once and John & Evelyn Irak did that, I remember standing at the cross roads in the centre of Royston with them, when Evelyn said to John who was looking up the High Street "Are you expecting a young man coming running down the street saying Hello Daddy". So funny! We held Presidents Evening when we invited our President Sir Sandy Reid, Bt to join us with other guests. Aldo Viarengo brought with him some of the garlic he had grown which was very nice which was typical of 91ster. Les Wilshaw brought over an American flag for the Prop Memorial flag pole which had flown over the White House. Les

made a splendid cocktail as Margaret and I experienced at David 's house one night.

Those members who worked in the Museum were also very helpful when we took the Societies stall to air shows. RAF Mildenhall was a very popular place to go to as the air show was over two days. We visited RAF Upper Heywood, RAF Alconbury and many other airfields and venues. We also had a copy of the "Memphis Belle" film. Graham Simons who is now an author and along with Harry Friedman wrote "Memphis Belle dispelling the myths" knew Jim Ashton, a Keeper at the RAF Museum and Graham gave him permission to copy the film in return for Tower Museum getting a copy. We took the film all over Southern England when we gave lectures, that raised much needed funds for the Society.

When the second "Memphis Belle" film needed a script, Christine the daughter of Willian Wyler along with a script writer came to the Barracks. I had a day off from work and was given permission by the then Commanding Officer to take them around the Barracks and the airfield. Enigma Films at Pinewood Studios brought seven of the Memphis Belle crew along with their wives and Joe Giambrone, Crew Chief back to the Barracks. The production team from Enigma Films came to Museum and asked why we had not got a B-17. We never got a mention in the film credits.

In 1992 the East Anglian Tourist Board organised a programme for the 50th Anniversary of American entering W.W.II. On the brochure was a photograph of a young pilot with his flying gear. Roger Freeman phoned me, as he often did, and asked me who it was. Fortunately, Willian Arthur and his wife had visited the Museum. I had just retired and we had a wonderful time in North Hertfordshire and South Cambridgeshire. I was fortunate to be invited to St James Palace and was one of six people introduced to the Duke of York after a Service in Bury St Edmunds Cathedral.

The next milestone was the return of Colonel Bob Morgan and his wife to celebrate the 50th anniversary of end of his 25 missions. We hired Hitchin Town Hall and had a wonderful time. We joined forces with North Herts Museum (NHM) and took about £1,200 of which £900.00 was profit that we shared with NHM. Colonel Jerome Church, MBE, RRF, made Colonel Bob and his party very welcome. When Colonel Church time at the Barracks Commanding Officer finished he was flown out of the Barracks. The Museum supplied him with George Parks flying helmet and goggles. George Parks was wonderful Secretary for your Memorial Association. One wrote a letter and by return George replied. We still keep in touch.

Paul Chryst was very kind in getting us from Wright Patterson (WP) his A2 jacket on loan for the Museum along with three uniforms, an Officers, enlisted airman's and WAAC. Paul asked for the A2 jacket back for an exhibition at WP which I sent back. Don Mackinnon, one of the members who helped in Museum returned the three uniform's through RAF Mildenhall. In 1994 I was accused by a lady of stealing these artefact.

Graham Simons has obtained a DC-3 casivac equipment. He contacted Wright Patterson and they did not have one for their Dakota so it was sent over via RAF Mildenhall. In return they gave us five reels of WW II combat film. I worked for BAe Space Systems as the Lead Production Engineer and from 1982/86 was working on a joint project with Hughes Space Centre in El Segundo. During that time the WW II film went missing. Along with two glass red and black knobs from a pre-war ink stand and my wife pre WW II foundation pen, these were

the only things to go missing while I was Curator. I still get many inquiries from people seeking information.

One piece of artefact I cherished was a copy of the map used by Jake Howland when his aircraft lead the 91st BG(H) over the beach head on D-Day. We had visitors from all over the World but one 91ster I never meet was Eugene Letalien, who often phoned me during the early hours of the morning. I have missed in this article many 91sters, their wives and their children as space prohibits me naming them but one 91ster I must mention is Paul Limm and his wife Jeannie. Paul and over many years has given me sound advice when needed. Wonderful friends who we meet at the 2004 reunion in Washington. We often speak to each other.

It was a privilege to be associated with the Tower Museum and I wish the Museum every success for the future.

Vincent A. Hemmings

May 2012