

“Return to Base”

The Full Account of a Single Wartime Incident



by

Ken Chatfield - April 2014

It is a Thursday afternoon in May 1944. The country has been at war for four and a half years. A lone aircraft is approaching low towards RAF Ibsley. Nothing unusual there, except perhaps a stuttering note from the engine.

At the controls, a young US airman is struggling to keep control of the cumbersome aircraft. Just 22 years old, and having only left his training base in the States some three months previously, he now finds himself all alone, nursing and wrestling a sick aircraft back to base. The family home, and his new wife, back in New Jersey must seem a long way away.

But as the higher land of the common falls away towards the Avon valley, the airfield is there, right ahead. Surely everything will be OK now?

Down below however, between himself and the safety of the airfield, is a village school, ominously positioned just outside the airfield perimeter fence. The precarious decision to keep the school open, whilst flying operations commenced and increased right alongside, is about to be tested.

My dad was a pupil at the school, and was there that afternoon. Over the years, I have heard stories about what happened from Dad himself, and from his Dad before him – but I have never known the full account. Having seen a recent reference to the incident, and also noted that the 70th anniversary is fast approaching, my natural curiosity led me to see what I could find out.

I was soon immersed in the almost endless information that is now available to us all via the internet. I ended up researching the full story – before, during and after the pieces that I had known.

In this booklet, I have reproduced a summary version of what I found, to create a formal record. If I have made any errors or omissions – and I am sure that I must have – I apologise, and I will happily make corrections for any that are pointed out to me.

1. Rockford School

The tiny schoolhouse by the green in Rockford (nowadays more familiar as the Alice Lisle pub) served as a village school for many years. The building dates back to the mid-18th century, but it probably became a school sometime during the latter half of the 19th century when the provision of state education for all children became widespread and then eventually mandatory.



From then until the second world war, children from the surrounding parish spent their schooldays there, surrounded by the fields of the Somerley estate in which many of their parents would have toiled as estate workers. The onset of war however brought significant change for the children at Rockford School.

Towards the end of 1940, a large area of the estate to the immediate north and west of the school was given up to the Air Ministry for the creation of a new Fighter Command airfield. Thousands of tons of rubble from the bomb damage in Southampton were shipped in to provide ballast for the runways and buildings. RAF Ibsley was opened in February 1941, although construction activity continued through the rest of that year.

It seems surprising today that, not only through this period but also through most of the remainder of the war, the school continued to operate – despite being located right on the boundary of the operational airfield and just 250 metres from the main runway.

The school house was divided into two, with a big sliding wooden partition separating the infants from the older children. The infants were taught by kindly Miss Margaret, and the older ones by a more formidable teacher known to the children as 'Ma Dimmy' (believed to be Agnes Dimiioniatiss), who was rather feared by the youngsters.

My dad, Tony Chatfield – was aged five and was one of the infants when the war started. Amongst those at the school with him, he remembers David Tanner, Dennis and Cyril Peckham, Mary Shutler, Elsie Dean and Gwen Gilbert.

He lived with his parents in Snails Lane, a short distance away across fields that have now largely been replaced by ponds and lakes. Having an airfield built nearby must have seemed most exciting for a young boy – although the reality of the situation was soon highlighted to the family when, like most properties around the airfield, their garden became host to a surface-type air raid shelter built in reinforced white bricks.

Tony's route to school was a diagonal footpath across the fields – on what is now the Spinnaker sailing lake – to emerge near to the cross roads where Ivy Lane meets Gorley Road. The bungalow there (where Ivy Cottage is today) doubled as a shop in those days (and indeed for many years later) – operated at the time by the Adlam family.

2. Wally Walling and the 404th Squadron

In Newark, New Jersey, Willis R. Walling – known as Wally – was 18 and just graduating from high school when the war in Europe started. He embarked on a business career in pipe and tube engineering. The US remained out of the war, and bound by a neutrality act, through the early stages of the conflict. Support for the Allies was soon growing however, alongside a build-up of US military forces, including the introduction of conscription in 1941.

The US entered the war following the attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941, and many young men quickly volunteered for service. Wally was among them, enlisting in the Army Air Force. He undertook his initial training with the Southeast Air Corps, then graduated and was commissioned in the Class of 1943E. His first assignment was to Camp Springs, Maryland – better known today as Andrews Air Force Base, and home to Air Force One, the US presidential aircraft.

Whilst at Camp Springs, in 1943 at the age 21, Wally married his high school sweetheart, Peggy, in the Air Force Base Chapel. From there, he was posted to

Richmond Virginia to become one of the founding members of the new 404th fighter squadron, part of the 371st USAAF Fighter Group. Under the leadership of Col Bingham T Kleine, the 371st comprised three new squadrons – 404th, 405th and 406th.

The three squadrons were to fly P-47 Thunderbolts. Made by the Republic aircraft company, the P-47 was a massive mid-wing fighter aircraft - the largest, heaviest, and most expensive fighter aircraft in history to be powered by a single piston engine. Fully laden with fuel and armaments, a P-47 could weigh almost eight tons – as much as a Routemaster London bus! It was powered by a Pratt & Whitney double wasp engine – 18 cylinders (in 2 rotary banks of 9) with a total capacity of 46 litres and producing 2535 hp.

In fact it was the 4th generation Thunderbolt – denoted P-47D and the most common type produced – that the 371st were equipped with. These retained the distinctive fuselage shape – referred to as ‘razorback’ – with a tall spine behind the pilot, as shown in the photo below. This shape resulted in poor rearward visibility and, later in the war, it was revised with an all-round canopy – these later aircraft being referred to as ‘bubbletops’.



To distinguish the squadrons, the 404th, 405th, 406th used fuselage codes 9Q, 8N, and 4W respectively, and their aircraft were painted with nose colours on the engine cowling of red, blue and yellow respectively.

With training complete, Wally's squadron awaited deployment to Europe. This followed early in 1944 when, along with thousands of other US and Canadian

troops, they arrived in New York to join a troop ship for the Atlantic crossing. Unknown to them, their transfer was part of Operation Bolero – the build-up of forces in readiness for the D-Day landings.

For the 404th however, their crossing was not to be made in just any old troop ship. They were to embark from Pier 54 (a Cunard pier and in fact the one where Titanic survivors had been brought ashore), and their ship was to be the RMS Mauretania. She had only been launched in 1938, having been built by Cammell Laird at Birkenhead – the largest ship ever built in England at that time, and designed to cater for 1360 Cunard White Star passengers in opulent comfort. Just a year later however, she had been requisitioned into war service and was soon being used to transport up to 7000 troops at a time, in rather less comfort, all around the world.

Wally and his colleagues sailed out through New York harbour in late February 1944, bound for Liverpool. This was just one of 21 such Atlantic crossings made by Mauretania. Like many of these, the voyage was to be unescorted and not part of a larger convoy. As such, it would have entailed a tense process of continuous zig-zagging, necessary to foil any attempts by German U-boats to set their sights on the large ship.

3. RAF Bisterne

Fortunately for all concerned, the crossing was uneventful and they sailed into the Mersey estuary on March 6th. From Liverpool, the airmen of the 404th squadron were transported by train to their assigned base. They arrived at Ringwood station on March 7th, just a few miles from their newly commissioned airfield – RAF Bisterne.

RAF Bisterne was a new and temporary airfield, and was in fact little more than a fortified grass strip. This makeshift nature was however entirely intentional. Bisterne was designated as an Advanced Landing Ground (or ALG), and was one of many that were established to replicate the sort of front line temporary airfields that would be needed on French soil to support the planned invasion. The aim of the ALGs in England was to enable the squadrons to develop experience with the harsh operational environment they would face later.

Typically, each ALG was constructed with two runways, broadly perpendicular and with the main one aligned to the prevailing wind. Bisterne had been constructed in the summer of 1943, on land of Brixey's Farm at Sandford, by the RAF's 5005 Airfield Construction Squadron. They had moved into the requisitioned farmhouse, which later became part of the base.

For Bisterne, with wide flat open fields, construction was fairly straightforward – with just a small copse of trees needing to be felled for the shorter E-W runway. For the runways, they used a product called Sommerfeld Tracking. This was heavy steel netting, held in place by metal spikes that were hammered deep into the ground, to reinforce the fields for runways and taxiways.

The system was named after its inventor, Kurt Sommerfeld, who had come to the UK in 1938 as a Jewish refugee. Born in Berlin, he had fled Germany with his family when the persecution of Jews intensified through the 1930s. After reaching England, he studied at Imperial College, and then set up an engineering business with his father (who had the misfortune of being called Adolf). Kurt invented the Tracking product in 1940, for airfield use, but also for roadways on sand or mud. Initial production was by the family firm. For runway use, it was originally claimed to be robust enough for Wellington and Lancaster bombers – although it soon became clear that this was critically dependent on the ground conditions underneath.

The airfield at Bisterne was complete by September 1943, and then farming recommenced – to provide some natural camouflage – until it was needed the following year. As plans for D-Day were developed, the new airfield was handed over to US forces in early 1944. US Army engineers arrived and erected a large number of tents along the edges of adjacent woods, to house the servicemen.

In US terms, the base was designated USAAF Station 415, and it became operational with the arrival of the three squadrons of the 371st on 7th March 1944. The improvised facilities, and the late winter weather, probably came as something of a shock to the fresh arrivals who had been enjoying the comforts of a US airbase just a few weeks before.

So, as spring arrived, the rural peace of the Avon Valley south of Ringwood was shattered by the roar of three squadrons of P-47 Thunderbolt fighter-bombers.

The pilots and ground crew honed their skills at Bisterne and, from April, they were assigned to IX Fighter Command which was being assembled as a key element in the forthcoming allied invasion. This incorporated 45 flying groups, operating some 5,000 aircraft.

For the 371st, operations proper began on April 12th with a fighter sweep over France. In the weeks that followed, a variety of missions were flown – bomber escorts, fighter sweeps and ground attacks, all with little enemy opposition.

Before long though, the constant exercising by three squadrons, using the beast of an aircraft that was the P-47, was beginning to take its toll on the temporary airfield, which was more suited to its former agricultural life. The airfield was becoming badly rutted and waterlogged, and the mesh covered runways were becoming progressively bulged and rutted under the weight of the heavy Thunderbolts. Punctures and even bent propellers and lost tail-wheels were becoming common occurrences.

Conditions became so bad that on April 21st, all three squadrons and all serviceable P-47s were flown to RAF Ibsley, three miles to the north, which was of course a permanent airfield with metalled runways and more robust infrastructure. This was to allow a temporary respite and some remedial work for the airfield at Bisterne. The plan was to be at Ibsley for just 10 days or so, but the initial repairs were deemed inadequate so the stay was extended.

This situation was not unusual. The Sommerfeld Tracking was found to be far from ideal where ground conditions became sodden – such as might be found in a river valley. Many of the later temporary runways were constructed with a more robust product – Square Mesh Track (SMT) – similar to the heavy mesh now used for reinforced concrete. It seems likely that the second repair at Bisterne entailed applying additional ballast and then replacing some or all of the netting with SMT.

Another product used in airfield construction, and favoured by the Americans, was pierced steel planking – sometimes called Marsden Matting – although this was more commonly used for assembly and holding areas rather than on runways. It is likely that the Americans would have introduced this to such areas at Bisterne.

4. Operations Move to Ibsley

The temporary move to Ibsley did not mean any relaxation in their operational activities, and the three squadrons continued with training flights and operational missions. On May 8th, they had their first combat with the Luftwaffe near Le Havre, resulting in two Messerschmitt BF-109s being credited as shot down for the loss of one P-47.

Thursday May 11th began like any other day. For the children at Rockford school, the sky would have been filled with the sound of aircraft from early morning. Later, with no school meals in those days, for Tony, like most of the other children, lunch meant walking back home. He arrived there as usual that day, and was joined by his dad, Walter, who worked in Mr Guy's market garden business that was also in Snails Lane. After lunch, it was not unusual for his mum, Sarah, to have to usher him out to be back at school on time. On this occasion however, he surprised his parents by being ready to return promptly. This was because the afternoon promised to be a bit more interesting than usual – the older children (he was 10 now) would be leaving the school house and crossing the green to practice their school play on the stage in the WI hall.

As the afternoon unfolded, Walter was back working in the market garden fields. Suddenly there was the sound of a crash and a plume of dark smoke was seen rising up from the direction of Rockford. Walter, together with his boss Joe Guy and his workmate Albert Cook, were all in the Home Guard – and they immediately set off on bicycles to see what had happened.

As they approached Rockford Green, it was clear that the incident had happened just outside the airfield boundary, and soon they were shocked to discover that the crash site was in fact at the WI hall. An aircraft had crashed into the hall, virtually destroying it before crashing through the airfield fence and starting a fire. Ground crews from the airfield had already arrived at the scene and were fighting the fire. Walter frantically asked about the infants who were in the hall – and was surprised but very relieved to be told that the hall had in fact been empty.

The children were duly located in the schoolhouse. It later emerged that their safety was all thanks to a rather pompous 'nit-nurse' who had arrived at the school on her county rounds. This of course was still in the period when local education

authorities were responsible for the health and physical condition of the children in their care. When the nurse had arrived at the school that day, the headmistress had suggested that the nurse should inspect the younger children in the school house, and then relocate to the WI hall to do the older ones whilst they rehearsed. The nurse had protested that this would mean having to set up her equipment twice, and this would take too long. The headmistress relented, and so the rehearsal in the hall was postponed until after the inspection was complete. That decision may have saved many children's lives.

The children hadn't heard anything unusual until the crash itself – probably because aircraft noise would have been so familiar, and the ailing Thunderbolt had come in across the higher ground to the east (across the common from the direction of Linford). They had been preparing to walk across to the hall when the crash happened. As the fire took hold, and ammunition began exploding, they were hastily taken back into the safety of the schoolhouse.

It later transpired that it was Wally Walling's Thunderbolt. He had taken off with his squadron who were to fly as escort on a mission to bomb railway yards in France. Having only just headed out east across the forest, Wally had experienced several explosions from the engine bay that had left him dazed and the aircraft losing power. His squadron leader told him to bale out, but he couldn't do so safely so he decided to try and get back to Ibsley. As he nursed the ailing aircraft back to the airfield, the problems persisted and he had failed to clear the nearby buildings on his final approach to the runway.

He later reported a sudden loss of height which saw him heading straight towards a 'house with a hay-covered roof', requiring him to take avoiding action. This would have been Heather Cottage – a traditional cottage on Rockford Green whose thatched roof would have been an unusual sight to a young airman from New Jersey. In seeking to avoid the house, he landed on and destroyed the adjacent WI Hall, starting a fire from the fuel that was still on board from the aborted flight.

Wally was extremely lucky to be pulled from the wreckage by the crew of a nearby anti-aircraft gun. He suffered facial burns and injuries to his legs, with the initial prognosis being that he wouldn't fly again. After declining plans to repatriate him

to the US, he spent several weeks in hospital and then a period of convalescence to regain use of his legs. He surprised his doctors by returning to flying little more than a month after the accident.

The incident was recorded officially as “crashed after take-off due to engine failure, hit W.I. hut in Ibsley, no casualties”, with the aircraft – USAAF Registration No. 42-76391 – marked as “written off (damaged beyond repair)”. It was also later noted that Heather Cottage had been full of people at the time of the crash.

Many years later, after an unfortunate series of mid-air explosions on Thunderbolts that claimed the lives of many pilots, a design fault was identified which had caused batteries to explode close to fuel lines. It is highly likely that this is what afflicted Wally's aircraft, and he was very lucky to have survived.

5. D-Day and France

Three days after the accident, on Sun May 14th, the squadrons returned to Bisterne, having been at Ibsley for just over three weeks. If it hadn't been for the state of the runways at Bisterne, the accident would never have involved civilians and buildings in the way that it did. On the other hand, Wally may not have benefited from a rapid rescue by the experienced and equipped ground crew.

D-Day was just a few weeks later on June 6th 1944. Wally was still in hospital recovering from the crash. Units from IX Fighter Command were heavily involved in air attacks on German forces in Normandy. For the 371st, they were held in reserve for most of D-Day itself, with only Wally's 404th squadron being called upon, in the early evening. In the days that followed though, all three squadrons were busy, including attacks on railways and gun emplacements in France during the invasion.

From June 16th 1944, ten days after the invasion and with the beaches secured, military leaders began deploying air force fighter groups to France. An ALG airstrip (designated A-6) at Beuzeville in Normandy was the first airfield to be created on the beachhead. It had been declared operational on 14th June. The 371st began transferring from Bisterne to Beuzeville on 17th June, operating from both bases

until the final party transferred on 29th June. It was during this period that Wally re-joined the squadron and returned to flying duties. Also during this period, on June 20th, 404th squadron had one of their most successful missions when an encounter during an armed reconnaissance mission resulted in four enemy aircraft being shot down without loss.

During its time at Bisterne, the 371st lost ten P-47s on operations, and three – including Wally's – in flying accidents. RAF Bisterne was closed in the late summer of 1944 and, before the year was out, the fields had been returned to farm-land. The unit's other temporary ALG airfield at Beuzeville also saw a short life, closing on 18th September.

6. Remainder of War

The 371st continued to patrol beachhead areas and conduct assaults against the enemy during the remainder of the Normandy campaign. In July, they participated in the aerial barrage that prepared the way for the Allied breakthrough at St Lo, and supported the subsequent drive across northern France.

From early August, the command structure was reorganised with most fighter units transferring to Tactical Air Commands. The 371st was re-assigned to XIX Tactical Air Command, providing air support for the United States Third Army under General Patton, as they advanced eastwards across France and Germany. After leaving Beuzeville, they relocated several times to follow the campaign, including periods based at Tantonville and Metz in France, and later at Frankfurt and Furth in Germany.

They conducted operations attacking a host of targets included factories, bridges and railways, and this period included providing air support to ground forces during the Battle of the Bulge in winter 1944/5. By now, huge demands were being made on the fighter squadrons, with the number of operations growing rapidly as the German forces were pushed back.

In recognition of their contribution during this phase of the war, the 371st Fighter Group were awarded the Distinguished Unit Citation (DUC). The DUC is conferred on units of the US armed forces, for extraordinary heroism in action against an armed enemy, such as to set it apart from other units participating in the same campaign. The award to the 371st was for a particularly intense period of activity between March 15th and 22nd 1945 in preparation for allied forces crossing the Rhine. On one day alone – March 18th – aircraft of the 371st flew 144 close support sorties for the Third Army.

The squadrons remained with XIX TAC until the end of the war. Operations continued up until VE Day on May 8th 1945, and they remained in Europe for several more months before returning to the US in October. The 371st was formally inactivated on November 10th 1945.

7. Wally's Later Life

In total, Wally flew 67 mission in Europe, and was awarded the Air Medal with four clusters. On his return to the States, he was assigned to the Yuma Army Air Base, Arizona as a flying officer and later as Director of Personnel. Peggy joined him there, working as secretary to the Air Marshall of the Yuma Air Base.

On his release from active duty, they returned to New Jersey to raise their family. Wally returned to the business world, in sales and administration, and became a captain in the newly-formed US Air Force Reserve. In June 1950 he was recalled to active duty for a short stint during the Korean War.

He prospered in his business career such that, in 1959, he became the owner of the engineering business in which he had worked. It became the Swan Manufacturing Corporation, distributors and fabricators of tubular products, and moved to Rockaway, New Jersey. Later, the business was sold to the vast Allegheny metals business – a company whose heritage goes back to supplying the steel for the Empire State Building.

He maintained a keen interest in flying, including through the P-47 Jug Pilots Association, of which he became a life member. He has returned to the Ringwood



airfield memorial by Cross Lanes chapel at Mockbeggar.

8. A Few Updates

Rockford School is of course now the Alice Lisle pub – with the wooden turnstile entrance (for counting the children in) one of the few remaining clues to its former life. I have always known it as Rockford School, although I have also seen it referred to as Ellingham School which may have been the correct name for some or all of its existence. Shortly after the accident, the risks were considered too great and the school was closed. The children were transferred to Ringwood and Hyde – records show twenty arriving at Ringwood. This followed a more serious incident, just a few weeks after Wally's crash, when several ground crew were killed by exploding ammunition whilst fighting a fire to an aircraft that had crashed on take-off. The school reopened after the war, but was finally closed for good in 1963, with my sister being one of the final pupils – who were transferred once again to Ringwood.

Most of RAF Ibsley is now lost beneath Blashford Lakes, although the control tower is still visible just north of Moyles Court School and some of the buildings remain on adjacent farmland. Airfield operations ended in 1946, before full closure in 1952. The airfield then had a brief life as a motor racing circuit, with races being held between 1951 and 1956. Many top drivers raced at Ibsley, including John Surtees, Mike Hawthorn and Colin Chapman, with spectator numbers sometimes exceeding 20,000. Work to break up the surface and extract the gravel began in the 1960s.

area on a number of occasions. On one such visit in June 2004, sixty years after D-Day, he unveiled the commemorative plaque for RAF Bisterne (see photo). This can be seen on one of the original barns of Brixkeys Farm that was used as part of the base. On a later visit, in 2009, he returned to Ibsley and unveiled a panel on the

After the war, the old timber WI hall that had been destroyed was eventually replaced with a more modern prefabricated one. This remained in use for many years, until many of the smaller rural WI branches began to merge and rationalise. The Ellingham branch appears to have closed in 1992. The site of the WI Hall is now occupied by a new house, Horseshoe Cottage.

Next door, Heather Cottage is still there. On one of Wally's return visits to the area, the RAF Ibsley Historical Group arranged for him to have afternoon tea there. Tony, a member of the Group, was there too.



Horseshoe Cottage and Heather Cottage today

Tony still lives in Snails Lane, now surrounded by lakes where once there were fields. It was probably growing up next to an operational airfield that started his lifelong interest in aviation. He progressed through the ATC, before joining the RAF as a regular serviceman. The dark, cool air raid shelter served as a seed shed for many years, before finally making way for a new garage in 1984.

RAF Bisterne returned quickly to farmland – few signs remain now, except for the plaque on the wall of the barn which serves as a memorial to all who served there.

After the war, many inactivated units were redesignated and allocated to various US states to create new units for the Air National Guard. The 371st Fighter Group was allocated to the State of Oregon, and was eventually redesignated as the

142nd Fighter Wing, whilst maintaining the lineage and battle honours of the 371st. Based at Portland, Oregon, they currently fly the F-15 Eagle.

Quite a few P-47s survive in various states of preservation around the world, including three in the UK – two at the Imperial War Museum at Duxford (one of which still flies) and one at the RAF Museum at Hendon. The picture below is the display aircraft in the American Hall at Duxford.



Front Cover Picture – Another P-47 Thunderbolt – this time an actual 404th squadron one (note the 9Q markings and red nose). This is a slightly later variant than the crash aircraft though -- built in 1944 and with the revised 'bubbletop' canopy and lower fuselage. The picture was taken towards the end of the war, on the ground in Germany as the Allies advanced.