Eye witness to Eye Airfield.

*In 1942 Raymond G Dozier was an Assistant Engineering Officer with the 839th Engineer Aviation Battalion. When he found himself at Eye, helping to construct a new airfield but in 1993 he returned for a nostalgic trip to see what had happened in the intervening years to the airfields he had helped to construct all those years before. A year later in 1994 he sat down and wrote this account of what had happened all those years ago*

*52 years ago, what were you doing, how did you get there, why were you there at all? Some things spring to mind easily, others are hazy and require more thought. Others have long been forgotten. I will do my best to recall what my life was like in those dark distant days*

On 10 June 1942, 11 days after graduating from college with a BSc degree in civil engineering and a commission, through ROTC. (Reserve Officers’ Training Corps), in the Army Corps of Engineers I reported for active duty as an Assistant Engineering Officer with the 829th Engineer Aviation Battalion. This was a negro battalion – all the enlisted men were black and all the officers, except the chaplain, were white. Two months and nine days later we departed from the Port of New York for an unknown destination. On the morning of the 30th/31st August our ship tied up in the port of Liverpool, England. All the troops remained on board during the day. But as night fell we boarded a train and went directly to Diss, Norfolk. Here we were met by English army lorries which took us to our tent city that had been set up alongside the hedgerows that bordered the B1077 road adjacent to the future site of the headquarters complex of station 134. This was where we had been sent to construct our first airfield that would be used by bombers in the war against Germany.

The fields where the base was to be built was excellent farm land. Each field being separated by neat hedgerows that were well dressed and dotted at intervals with large trees. I assumed that each field had been owned by the same family for many years. It seemed a shame to take this beautiful land and convert it into a heavy bomber base but it was here that the British Air Ministry had elected to build it. By the time our battalion arrived the British had already drawn up the plans for the complete base, the location of the taxi ways and hardstands and all sites specified for buildings and roads. As I remember it, there was only one small farmhouse and out buildings that would have to be demolished before the base was completed, it was this farmhouse that we used for battalion headquarters and the officers living quarters.

It was a considerable time after we arrived before our surveying instruments and other light engineering equipment to caught up with us. Our heavy equipment was also delayed. In the intervening period we received some heady equipment from the British. We started our surveying for the layout of the runways with a small transit level that had a small bubble levelling devise in the centre of the instrument. It had a small azimuth circle and a Vernier that would not read to the nearest second. It was the type of instrument a builder of small buildings or homes would use for layout work. Our initial work, however, proved to be accurate enough as when we received our regular transits and levels and checked it out we were within tolerances.

The stakes that we set for line and grade were prime targets for the civilians driving their tipper trucks and the lorry drivers who were bringing sand, gravel and bagged cement to the base. This meant we had to reset many of the stakes. Once, while we were doing initial surveying for the approach zones and glide angles, we left a ranging pole sticking in the ground near the road whilst we went for our midday meal. On returning it was gone. I asked the occupants of a nearby house if they knew anything of the missing pole. They had it alright and gave it back to me at the same time giving me a lecture about the land where we had been working which was private property and that we required permission to come on to. I departed and left that part of the surveying till a later date when we had obtained permission.

After our arrival at Eye we soon became accustomed to air raid warnings, usually we didn’t take cover but simply kept a sharp eye out for enemy planes, though we never did see any. Within a week of arriving in tent city the air raid warnings sounded necessitating us to take cover in the ditches and hedgerows close to the tents. We heard a series of dull thuds but no explosions or fires. The next morning, we found a string of small incendiary bombs in line with a row of tents but they had fallen well short of them. Why they did not ignite I do not know. I doubt that they all had faulty detonation devices, so I guess they just didn’t get enough oxygen to burn.

Several days later I was listening to the German propaganda broadcast on the radio by Lord Haw Haw when I heard that the ship, that brought us to the UK had been sunk in the Irish Sea. The report also said that the 829th had been welcomed to Eye by an air raid on their camp.

Due to the vagaries of the British weather and continual movement of our vehicles conspired to turn the construction site into an expanse of mud, making life very unpleasant to say the least. We found it extremely hard to get Nissen huts built and roads laid into the living sites so that we could exist and operate with any comfort.

When we first arrived travel was generally difficult, as road maps were hard to come by. Added to this all the road signs had been taken down in case of invasion. The civilian population were also very reluctant to give directions to strange, armed soldiers in uniforms they did not recognise. When we became familiar with the routes to the various towns and supply points, we had very little trouble finding our way around. For most of us driving on the opposite side of the road did not present much of a problem. We start to have problems later when we became over confident or too relaxed.

There were two entrances to the camp one to the north by Brome Church the other to the west where the B1077 Eye Road cut between the airfield and the living area. If you left the site via the north entrance and turned left and walked a short distance on the left was a large old Tudor house. It was in this house that a large room had been turned into what I could only call a private club. Here you could socialise with the local people and get a drink. I describe it as a private club because we were given cards that indicated we were members of the “Devil’s Hand Basin Club”, it was a nice club but I did not frequent it very much.

I kept my card as a souvenir for a number of years but eventually it was lost. If I remember correctly the very nice lady who ran the place was called Mary and her husband was an officer in the British Forces serving in the Far East.

On my first visit to the cinema in Ipswich I was surprised to find people smoking inside, this was not allowed in the US. Another surprise I had was the reaction of the audience when an air raid warning was flashed on the screen. No body moved they just carried on watching the film. Even when the ‘red-alert’ was flashed on nobody left. I sat tight, all be it very nervously. Fortunately, no bombs were dropped near the cinema. After going to see a film we had hot fish and chips wrapped in a newspaper, English style, they were very good eating.

About 2 ½ months after arriving at Eye I had to have an appendectomy. As there were no US Army hospitals in the area was taken to the Borough General Hospital in Ipswich where English civilian doctors performed the operation and they did a good job. I stayed there about two weeks and received excellent care. The nurses and doctors were all good. As I recall, one of the nurses, Taffy, who was from Wales, was exceptionally good. While recovering from the operation I developed a taste for hot tea, mainly because tea was served first thing every morning, mid morning, mid afternoon and just before retiring at night and with all meals as well.

On leaving the hospital I went to an English officers’ convalescent centre near Ringwood not for from Bournemouth and Salisbury. I stayed there for four weeks. It was here that I met an English Officer who took me to several private clubs in that area. It seemed to me that private clubs were not uncommon in England at that time. Later in 1945, while recuperating from wounds I received while serving in Belgium, I found myself again hospitalised near Bournemouth. I went to one of these clubs and although I could describe in detail some of the things I remembered about it I got the impression that I wasn’t welcome. I left with no hard feelings because it was a private club and they had the right to refuse to serve me or to allow me to enter. The convalescent centre was well run and a nice place to recuperate but after being away from the battalion for over six weeks it was indeed good to get back and go to work again. Construction at Eye had progressed and was helped considerably by the arrival of another black battalion, this time the 827th Engineer Aviation Battalion. Eventually in late spring 1943, I along with the 829th was transferred to another Suffolk base, Debach, a few miles to the southeast.

When I arrived in England I was a young man not yet 21 and very much in love with a girl I had known most of my life. I was what I would call a ‘loner’. I celebrated my 21t birthday just a little over two months after we arrived at Eye. Being dedicated to my job I wanted to push the completion of Eye so we could start on another base, thinking that this hastened the victory I knew would achieve. I wanted this war to end as soon as possible so I could return to the US and get married. This I did just as soon as I got leave after being returned to the US in April 1945 for further hospitalisation.

While I England we were given days off and is was possible to take short leaves. I personally took only a few days off and no leave. I later years I have come to regret not taking advantage of all the things that were available me while I was in the UK. I never got to see the historic sites not did I get to know any of the local people on a familiar basis.

When Carolyn and I were planning our trip to England in 1993 we were very fortunate to be put in touch with Truett Woodall of Ipswich who was very familiar with the old base at Debach. We also made contact Don and Peggy Garnham who were very familiar with the old base at Eye. We met these people in September 1993 and they were exceptionally kind to us, always willing to go out of their way to help us find what we wanted to see and visit.

Mr Woodall took us to many places of interest that I knew and many places that I did not know in the Ipswich and Felixstowe area. He spent a whole day taking us to the old base at Debach and then to Eye where the Garnhams showed us the old base and places of interest in the area. Vising these bases was really a moving experience. At Eye we saw an old Vickers bulldozer and other abandoned e1uipment rusting away. The bulldozer was not a piece of our own heavy equipment but must have been one that the English had loaned to us.

I had always hope that the English would find some use for all the buildings we erected and all the concrete we poured though I had no idea of what they would do with it, but they really had “beaten the sword into ploughshares” at these two bases. Several industries were located on the old base at Debach. Some of the buildings we had constructed were being used. Most of the runways there had been reduced to rubble and hauled away as sub base material or fill material for the major motorways that had been built.

At Eye most of the old buildings had been removed but the developers had converted the area into an industrial park and were using some of the structures we built there. Much to my amazement the main runway was still intact and used for light or medium weight planes. It was indeed a very moving experience to stand on a runway that I had begun to construct over 50 years before and that had contributed to the defeat of Hitler.

There is no glory in construction work but it gives me a great sense of satisfaction o know that our efforts played an important part in achieving the successful outcome of World War II.

Raymond Dozier 1994.