

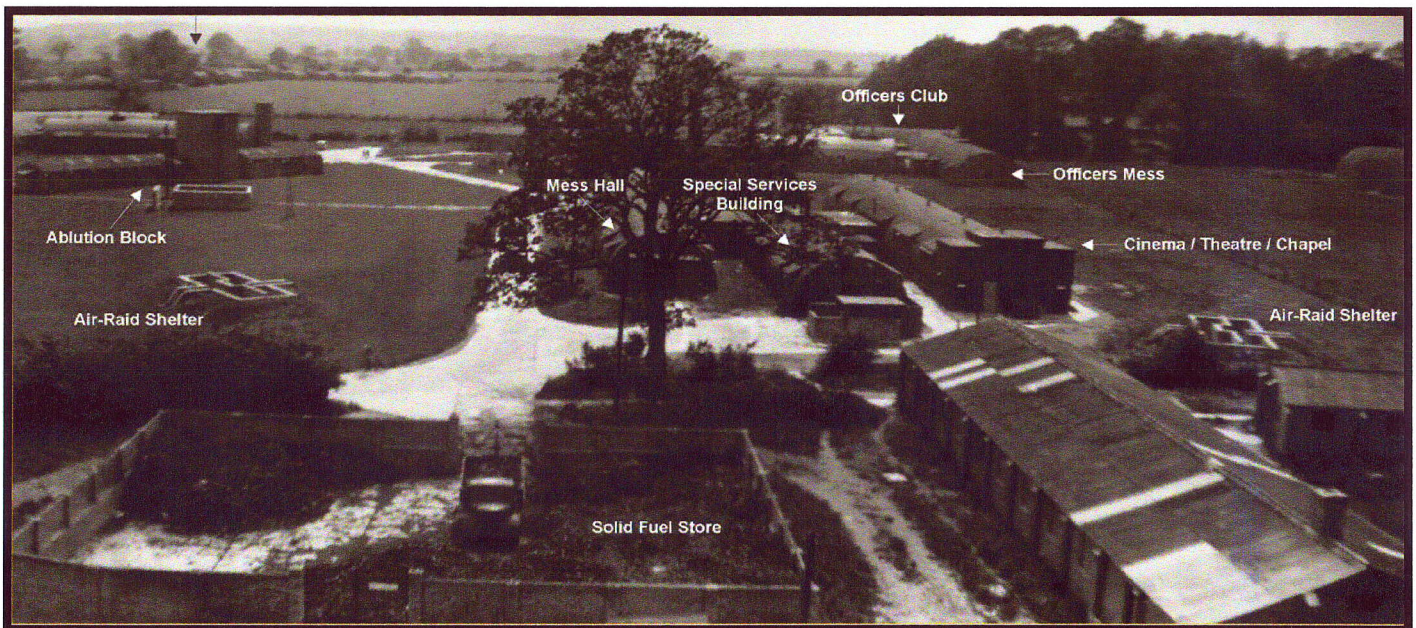
Update #33 – “City of Savannah”

B-17 Restoration

October 23, 2009

As we told you last week, Lt. Ralph Kittle and his crew were assigned to fly B-17 43-39049, also known as the “City of Savannah”, to England from Hunter Field in Savannah in December of 1944.

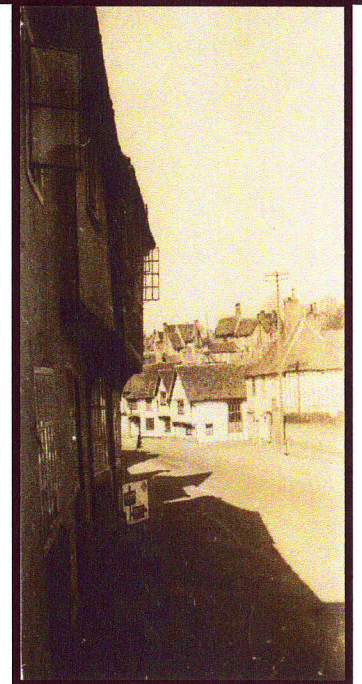
Army Air Force procedure called for ferry crews to depart from the aircraft they delivered to England immediately after arrival, with the crews moving off to Combat Crew training while the aircraft would receive last minute upgrading to prepare them for combat assignments. Accordingly, the Kittle crew left the “City of Savannah” in Wales and was transported by train to the Combat Crew Replacement Center located at Bovington, England. They never saw the B-17/43-39049, named the “City of Savannah” again. After completing their Combat Crew training Kittle and his crew were assigned to the 563rd Squadron of the 388th Bomb Group at Knettishall, in East Anglia.



487th Bomb Group (H) - Lavenham, Suffolk, UK - This photo was taken from the water tower on the field. View to the South.

According to English historian Graham Simons' the identifying signage that had been painted on 43-39049's nose and waist identifying the aircraft as the “City of Savannah” was most probably removed while the aircraft was being upgraded for combat. Records indicate that on January 12, 1945, 43-39049 finished its combat upgrades, including RAF compatible communications gear, and was assigned to the 389th Squadron of the 487th Bomb Group in Lavenham, England. At this time we have not been able to determine what the combat record of “049” may have been during the final months of the war.

Church Street, Lavenham, England - sometime during the war years



Five months after 43-39049 arrived in Lavenham, on May 7, 1945, the war ended in Europe. According to Eighth Air Force records, two months after the victory celebration 43-39049 was flown back to the US, landing at Bradley Field, in Connecticut, on the 12th of July. Several days later the aircraft was flown to a storage facility in Independence, Kansas, and on December 14, 1945 – almost one year to the day after its dedication as the “*City of Savannah*”, B-17G/43-39049 was declared as surplus equipment and apparently ended its career with the thousands of other WWII aircraft that were sold for scrap.



One of several “bone yards” after the war.

But what of the crew that posed for the pictures with the “*City of Savannah*” at Hunter Field and flew the aircraft to England? The story of the Kittle crew is typical of the danger and suffering endured by many Eighth Air Force veterans. After the crew left the “*City of Savannah*” in Wales they underwent Combat Crew training in England and flew their first mission with the 388th Bomb Group on January 28, 1945. They were never assigned a “permanent” aircraft, but always referred to themselves as the “*City of Savannah*” crew. After completing twelve successful missions they were shot down on March 5, 1945, near Krislice, Czechoslovakia. One crewmember, tail gunner Robert Hoyt was killed. The rest of the crew became POWs and survived the war. Several of the crew are still living today. Irwin Boxer, the Togglier/nose gunner who replaced the original bombardier, Flight Officer Abraham Falk when the crew arrived at the 388th, is living in California and has spoken at length with our B-17 volunteer historian Doug Reed. The top turret gunner/engineer, Lloyd Sanford, has answered questions for Doug through his daughter. Ralph Kittle died in 2005, but the story of the Kittle crew and the “*City of Savannah*” lives on today in his son’s Connecticut home, where “Kit” Kittle proudly displays the oil painting completed by Savannah artist Alberta Barber in 1945, depicting the “*City*” flying over the Savannah skyline.

The story of the B-17 named “*City of Savannah*” started in our city sixty five years ago. Today, for the survivors and the descendants of the men who took part in the story, and for the volunteers working on the restoration of our B-17 at the Mighty Eighth Air Force Museum, the story continues. Our restoration project honors not one aircraft and one crew, but all of the men who flew with the Eighth Air Force from England in World War II.

Because of space limitations in our update column we have provided only an overview of the entire story of B-17G/43-39049, also known as the “*City of Savannah*”. Thanks to Michael O’Leary of Challenge Publications you will be able to read the entire story, accompanied by additional photographs, in upcoming issues of one their magazines.

More to follow...

CORRECTION TO LAST WEEKS NEWSLETTER: The publisher of the book “*Memphis Belle – Dispelling the Myths*” was misprinted. It should read GMS Enterprises, Peterborough, England.