

Return to Ridgewell

By Robert Her

After more than fifty-six years, with the urging of my family and accompanied by my youngest son, I returned to Ridgewell in Essex. We were met at Witham by Jim Tennet and transported to the site occupied by the 381st Bomb Group during WWII. When we arrived at the museum we met Jim's wife Jennie and son Chris. Derek Mayes and Dave Osborne were there also to welcome us. After a cup of tea we viewed the beautiful memorial and the museum. Afterwards, they gave us a tour of what remains of the old air base, stopping frequently in order that we might take pictures and reminisce.



I am not a man of letters, nor one with the gift of turning a phrase, but I would like to tell you this:

I stood there and gazed out upon the green fields so lovingly cultivated by men of peace and felt a great sense of satisfaction. It seemed that the will of the Almighty had finally been fulfilled, for now, from this land there comes the gift of sustenance for man and beast. And the silence is broken only by the song of a bird or the voice of a new found friend. No longer is the land crisscrossed by strips of oil stained concrete and encircled by a black ribbon of asphalt. No longer do the hardstands and gray metal huts dot the land and deny it the ability to flourish and yield fruit. Gone now, is the tower that launched the mighty birds of destruction against an evil that sought to enslave our comrades in arms.

Gone now, is the roar of the mighty radial engines and the mournful scream of the ambulance. And yes, gone is the jocularly of youth. The silence of fear and the sorrow for lost comrades has passed into the world of memories but never forgotten. Gone now, the pit where we stored the implements of hell.

As I stood there and thought about what was, the sensations of sound, of sight and smell once again filled my senses. The smell of fuel, of burned gunpowder, of ozone, and even coffee in the debriefing room. I could feel the intense cold of high altitude and the strain of constantly scanning the skies. I could recall the muffled thump, the black smudges in the sky and the sudden appearance of holes in the aircraft.

Turning away and talking to new friends engendered thoughts of the pleasant times. Walks to a pub for a mug of beer and a pickled boiled egg. Learning to ride a bike with no coaster brake. The faces of the kids when we had candy or gum to offer. Trips to the great city of London. Poker games in the barracks. And if you were lucky, a date with a pretty girl.

This mission more than fifty-six years later has given me a rush of emotions and memories that I did not know was possible to experience. But the most significant and deepest feelings that I felt was the fact that the people remember us and to that end have labored long and hard in erecting the beautiful monument and museum. Their gracious hospitality is a memory that I shall always cherish.

To these of us who survive, to those of us who have passed on and especially to those who were killed or maimed please know that you are loved and remembered here in this land of peace.

ROBERT HERR, 381st, 532nd, PRICE CREW - WAIST GUNNER

Submitted 4/19/01 by Steve Herr for his dad