

# **SAFFRON WALDEN HISTORICAL JOURNAL**

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## **The impact of the American air bases during World War Two on the area of East Anglia**

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In 1939 there were only 1,700,000 people living in East Anglia. The main industry continued to be centred around agriculture, but the East Anglian economy was in a poor state in the pre-war period. The area was widely known for its self-containment. For many, East Anglia was very much a traditional place which disliked any sort of modernization or change. But there was no way in which East Anglia could avoid involvement in the Second World War. The geography of the area was perfect for an extensive number of airbases containing both British and American troops. The war itself was going to have a huge impact on this highly self-motivated, traditional area.

There were approximately 20,000 American men who arrived in East Anglia in January 1942. They were attracted to the area because of its closeness to Europe and because it would be relatively easy to construct the amount of bases that they required due to the flatness of the land. There were approximately 400,000 Americans during their peak in East Anglia, which means that they made up just 2.5% of the population. A high concentration of these were inhabiting the bases in Essex. By 1945, the number had diminished to just 185,000, but their presence would never be forgotten.

### **The Americans arrive**

There were a small number of American soldiers serving in East Anglia before the official entry of America into the Second World War. They were posted at Debden airfield and were volunteer pilots or 'Eagles' who had joined the RAF. Due to this, they wore the full RAF uniform and therefore did not stand out from their English counterparts. It was 1942 before East Anglia began to feel the full force of the American Air Force. The first

American troops arrived in East Anglia in January 1942. They took over bases in Debden, Little Walden, Duxford and Great Saling primarily, but soon spread around the area to places such as Willingale and North Weald. Their presence in the area appeared not to have been publicised and the news of their arrival appears to have been broken gently. This would suggest that there was a hesitancy on the part of the authorities about the Americans coming to East Anglia. It would appear that it was the conflict between the British and American troops, rather than between the locals and the Americans, that was most feared. The US War Department issued a handbook to all the GIs going to Britain containing advice in order to help them fit in. The British adopted similar methods in an effort to avoid conflicts. The English soldiers achieved a pay rise at the time of the Americans' arrival, evidence that both the British and Americans saw wages as a potential difficulty.

The Americans caused quite an imbalance in many towns and villages. The typically quiet Essex village quickly became 'full of mud and messy'. The Americans regularly frequented the pubs in the towns and liked to stay in them until late. They appeared to throw all their money away on beer, which shocked the locals because they were still quite poor in comparison. The locals would have to get used to the American way of doing things. Despite the initial apprehension, the typical reaction towards the Americans from the locals appears to have been one of excitement and welcome. One specific cause of popularity was the boost which they gave to the local economy. Employment figures for construction rose from 31,237 in February 1942 to 52,868 in May 1942, because of the number of bases required to house all of the Americans. The Americans constructed their own supermarkets on their bases, which may have been seen as a shun to the local community. But many of the locals found the Americans to have a friendly nature and they appreciated the way in which the Americans treated them. Sheila Kent, the signals operator at Debden Airfield, talks of how the Americans were very good to the children, and of the funds which the Americans kept for British children. She also says, in her memories of the American Air Force at Duxford, that they 'left an impression on Saffron Walden and the people of the town have never forgotten them over all this time'. The locals were also invited to many of the dances and events which were set up to help integrate the Americans, so they were helping to provide the area with a social life during the war period. With the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to say that the Americans made a great impression on the area when they first came and, despite some initial hiccups, they could only go on and build on the life that they were beginning to create in East Anglia.

### **Living in East Anglia**

As 1943 approached, further Americans came to the East Anglian region and the *Cambridge Daily News* estimated at the time that at the peak,

there were 400,000 GIs in East Anglia. They inhabited some 122 bases in the area and after the initial problems of settling, began to make a real impact. The American men formed many relationships with the East Anglians that they met. The majority of these relationships were with the women. It has been estimated that 60,000 East Anglian women were married to Americans. It was however difficult to gain approval for these marriages, principally due to the reputation that the Americans had earned. We can detect jealousy in the slogan that many British men used to describe the GIs: 'overpaid, oversexed and over here'. The British women appear not to have had the same opinion of the Americans as the British men. The majority of them were excited by the American presence in the area because it brought a good social life. The local girls were often invited to the hangars for dances, where they were able to experience American forms of music and dancing. The girls were also undoubtedly attracted to that which the Americans could offer them, nylon stockings, chocolates and flowers being some of the usual gifts.

Although many women formed lasting relationships with the Americans, many were left with the unfortunate consequences of their experiences. The number of illegitimate births nearly doubled with the arrival of the Americans. It was 4.3% in 1939 and by 1943 it had risen to 8.8%. A number of hostels were set up to cope with the mothers and babies of the GIs. This is therefore one area in which the Americans had a negative impact. It also fuelled the opinions of those who were against the Americans. A further negative effect was an increase in VD. At the beginning of 1943, the number of cases of VD had risen by 70% since the outbreak of the war in 1939. It is highly unlikely, however, that the Americans were the sole cause of this increase.

The American presence in the area provoked a number of events which would remain with the people even after the war. An American History and Institutions chair was set up at Cambridge University which allowed students to discover about the past of the foreigners within their midst. There was an American Cemetery opened in Cambridge, which was not set up by the East Anglians, but shows that East Anglia was the obvious place for an American to rest and be remembered. It also supports the evidence that attitudes towards the Americans had changed considerably since their arrival and the Mass Observation Organisation measured only a 22% anti-American feeling in 1943.

The numerous dances that the Americans had often attracted famous names from the American world of music. Bing Crosby and Glenn Miller were two in particular, and the local people felt that such events brought a touch of glamour in the region and always caused a stir. Eleanor Roosevelt came to see the troops and to give them thanks for their efforts so far in the war. Further proof of the blossoming friendship was how the two cultures supported each other in times of distress. In May 1944 an

aircraft crashed at Ashdon. A local resident, Mrs Elizabeth Everitt, witnessed the crash and was killed when she tried to free the crew of the bomber. The local Americans paid respect to her act of kindness by flying a formation of American aircraft over her funeral. She was also awarded a posthumous decoration by the US Army Air Force.

Despite many of these positive steps towards friendship, there were still some problems. The arrival of coloured troops in 1943 was arguably the biggest of the problems. Both countries perceived their arrival to be a problem, and separate bases were provided. Once again, however, it was rarely the locals who were disturbed by their presence, it was the British troops. Some towns were specifically allocated for use by only whites or only blacks, and the same was true of some public houses. The black troops did cause some problems for the locals of East Anglia. As with the white Americans, girls became the biggest of the problems. The girls themselves enjoyed the company of the black Americans and generally had a relaxed attitude towards them. The parents of these girls, however, failed to show the same attitude. There is also one recorded incident in which two black US soldiers were given to the American authorities for the suspected murder of a taxi driver in Colchester.

There are many sources which mention the Anglo-American Goodwill Association. The function of this organisation was to help make the Americans feel at home. The association helped to set up places such as an information bureau for the Americans' meetings with the local people and social occasions in the towns. There were still problems. Sheila Kent speaks, in her memories of being the signals operator at Debden Airfield, that every Sunday morning at 10 am, the war with Germany was suspended in order to resolve any domestic incidents between the British and American troops.

With regard to the rest of the country, East Anglia was experiencing a very different war. The existence of the American bases meant that the area was continuously targeted by German fighter planes. The area was also coping with becoming swamped by American airmen. There were of course American bases spread around England, but never to the same degree or concentration as there was in East Anglia. The East Anglians could really become accustomed to American ways and form true friendships with their visitors. Throughout the rest of England, there were not enough Americans for this to be the case. East Anglia therefore continued to be isolated during the war due to the large American presence and the separate way in which it had been affected by the war.

## **After the War**

As the Allies began to break through against the Axis powers, the Eighth Air Force moved from East Anglia to new bases in Europe. The Ninth Air

Force remained in the area until the end of the war in 1945. It was only after the Americans had left the area that the East Anglian people felt the real impact of the three years they had spent together.

Girls once again became a problem at the departure of the GIs. The Americans left many broken hearts behind when they returned to America. There were some cases in which an American decided to stay in East Anglia with his bride. Friendship also continued to exist between the English and Americans, and people such as Reg Robinson still continue to see these friends today. The GIs also left behind the results of their relationships. Along with the illegitimate children, there were many legitimate children whose fathers decided to return to America. There must consequently have been an increase in the number of single mothers in East Anglia immediately after the war. Sheila Kent says that in some of the reunions that have taken place between the British and the Americans, daughters have met their fathers. It is quite unlikely, however, that all of the children have been able to trace their fathers and we must therefore assume that there may still be in existence, some people who have never known their fathers because they returned to America.

The overall feeling at the time of the Americans' departure was one of a complete loss. Sheila Kent said that the people of Saffron Walden have never forgotten them, another wrote that a great silence settled on the villages. The presence of the Americans had awoken much of East Anglia and without them the area seemed quite lifeless. The locals had grown very fond of their visitors and had built some excellent relationships. Although the Americans had gone, the East Anglians were left with many reminders of their former presence. The Americans had a liberating effect on the youth of East Anglia. Not all approved of this: images such as the naked ladies on the sides of aircraft and the endless dances made some feel they were outrageous. The East Anglians were used to a very traditional way of living and even though the war undoubtedly removed some of this as tradition gave way to necessity, the East Anglians still appear to have been relatively easy to shock.

American sports such as basketball grew around the region in the post-war years, and parts of the American dialect were adopted during the years immediately following the war. Big Band music also became quite popular in the area. On Saturday August 13 1955, the Anglo-American Playing Fields were opened in Saffron Walden, leaving permanent reminders of the American presence during the Second World War. Even today we are reminded of the American presence here during World War Two. Every year many Americans come to East Anglia to visit the friends that they made during that time. Reg Robinson, for example, has many visitors from America who love to come back and visit and in turn he goes across to America to visit them. 1992 saw the 50-year celebrations of the

'Friendly Invasion' which shows just how the connections have remained. It would have been easy just to forget that the Americans were ever here, but instead their presence is celebrated and the friendships maintained. As part of the celebrations, a pamphlet was published: 'Never in history has such a lasting and sincere friendship ever existed'. It is probable that there is some exaggeration in this statement, but it shows the American view that the friendship remains continuously strong and extremely valued.

The long term relationships and friendships that were formed nearly 50 years ago and still exist are proof of the lasting impact that the Americans made on East Anglia. The Americans affected education, recreation, language and families during their stay, a far greater impact than could have first been expected. In an overall assessment of the impact of the Americans on East Anglia, it can be concluded that it was completely positive.

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