

The 445th Bomb Group

MISSION



TO

GOTHA

PART TWO

By GEOFFREY WATLING

The first part of the story of the "Mission To Gotha" by the 445th Bomb Group on 24 February 1944 was presented in the *JOURNAL*, Summer 1973, prepared by the late Geoffrey Watling. The story of the mission was told in detail, with a map of the raid, elapsed times, escort intercepts, and the areas of most intense flak.

We present here the second part, which was not previously included because of limited space, consisting of the supplementary information, bibliography, and a description of the memorial to the 2nd Air Division at Norwich Library, Norwich, England.

The attack on Gotha, the main assembly factory of Messerschmitt fighters, made on 24 February 1944 resulted in the loss of 13 B-24's of the 445th B.G. It was a high price, and 122 men failed to return to the base at Tibenham. But the 445th was to sustain a still greater loss seven months later in a raid on Kassel which is yet another story. In one other major incident in its history the Group attacked Hamm in the afternoon of April 22nd, 1944 and was given an unpleasant welcome over its very home base.

The Wing formed up at 1845 hours and flew into Germany, but missed the IP. The combat report said,

"... we were off course and passed through the North Sector of the Ruhr ..."

The bombs fell on Koblenz and the force made its way back across the polders of Holland, to be joined at the English coast in the dusk by a strong force of Luftwaffe intruders.

One B-24 had been lost over Ghent, but the unsuspecting American crews, tired after the mission, had already cleared their guns in preparation for landing when the intruders struck. Coastal and inland anti-aircraft guns blazed into action and the darkening skies became a confused mass of milling airplanes, punctuated by tracer shells, and the flaring crashes of Liberators of the 2nd Air Division. At 2330 hrs. the 445th was circling Tibenham, with the first of 22 B-24's on the approach. Some 15 Ju.88's and Me.140's slashed through the area. Away to the north the 448th B.G. at Seething watched three of their's fall out of the sky. On Tibenham a B-24J from the 453rd skidded in for an emergency landing. The author was watching also, and later reported, "... the Tibenham Liberators were strung out around the pattern when I saw a lean, dark twin-engined aircraft come up at low level from the south and bore upwards towards a B-24 flying over Tivetshall railway station. Suddenly a red flare shot out from the waist of the B-24 and the intruder sheered away into the night."

The excitement died down soon afterward, and the 445th was unhurt, but the lesson of relaxing vigilance was not lost.

The 445th was to win one more dubious distinction by having the highest loss of any Group in the War during a single mission. Freeman described it best: ¹

"The 445th had a remarkably high reputation. Its bombing record was good and during the three months following D-Day it led all Eighth B-24 groups in accuracy ratings. The 445th had flown some rough missions, notably that to Gotha in February, since when it had fared relatively well. But on September 27th the 445 Bomb Group and II/J.G.4 came together in violent action, resulting in the highest loss of a single group on a single mission.

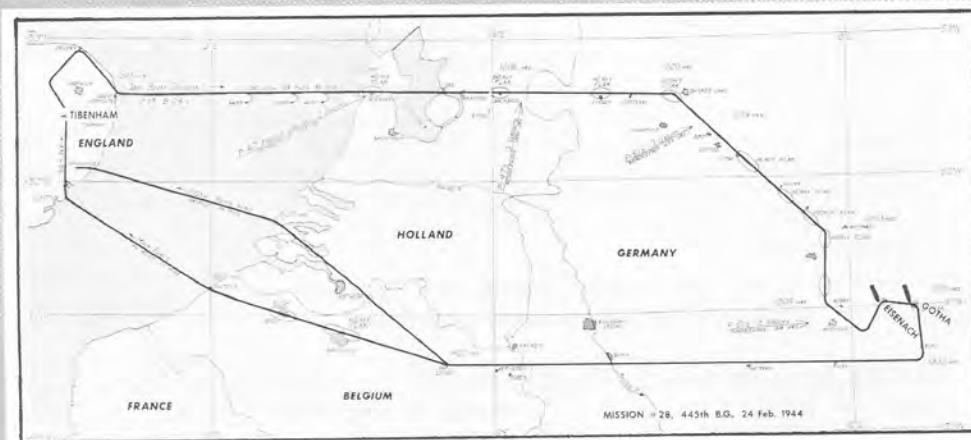
"The 2nd Division had sent 315 B-24's over solid undercast to the Henschel engine and vehicle plants at Kassel with 37 aircraft of the 445th Group leading in the second combat wing, navigating by Gee. At the IP the Group apparently took a wrong heading and edged away from the bomber column; their divergence went unnoticed by friends, but not by the enemy. The Group then made a PFF attack believing Kassel to be below, whereas the bombs actually fell just outside Gottingen some 20 miles away. Turning away, and still unaware of their error, the 445th simulated the withdrawal plan, which placed them well behind and to the east of the rest of the 2nd Division force. Ten minutes after bombing, while a few miles from Eisenach, three line-abreast waves of FW190's came in from six o'clock, closing at 150 mph, and split-S'ing downwards after firing. They were quickly followed by two Me109 Gruppen of J.G.4 who finished off the cripples in the now widely dispersed formation. Within three minutes the attack was over. Fire from the estimated ninety enemy fighters had sent down 25 Liberators and damaged most of the remainder, before P-51's of the 361st Group arrived in answer to a plea for help."

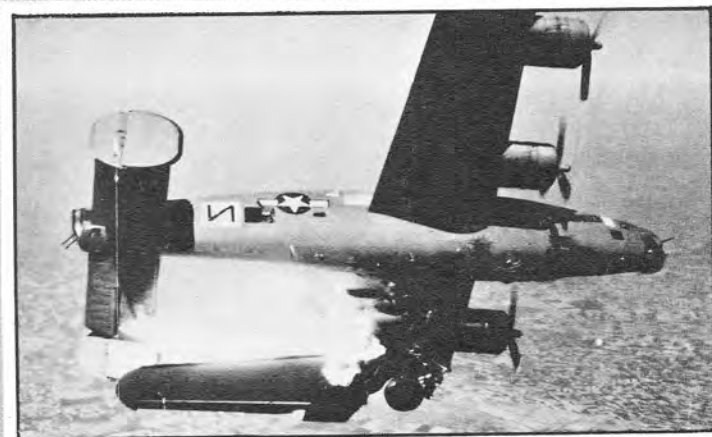
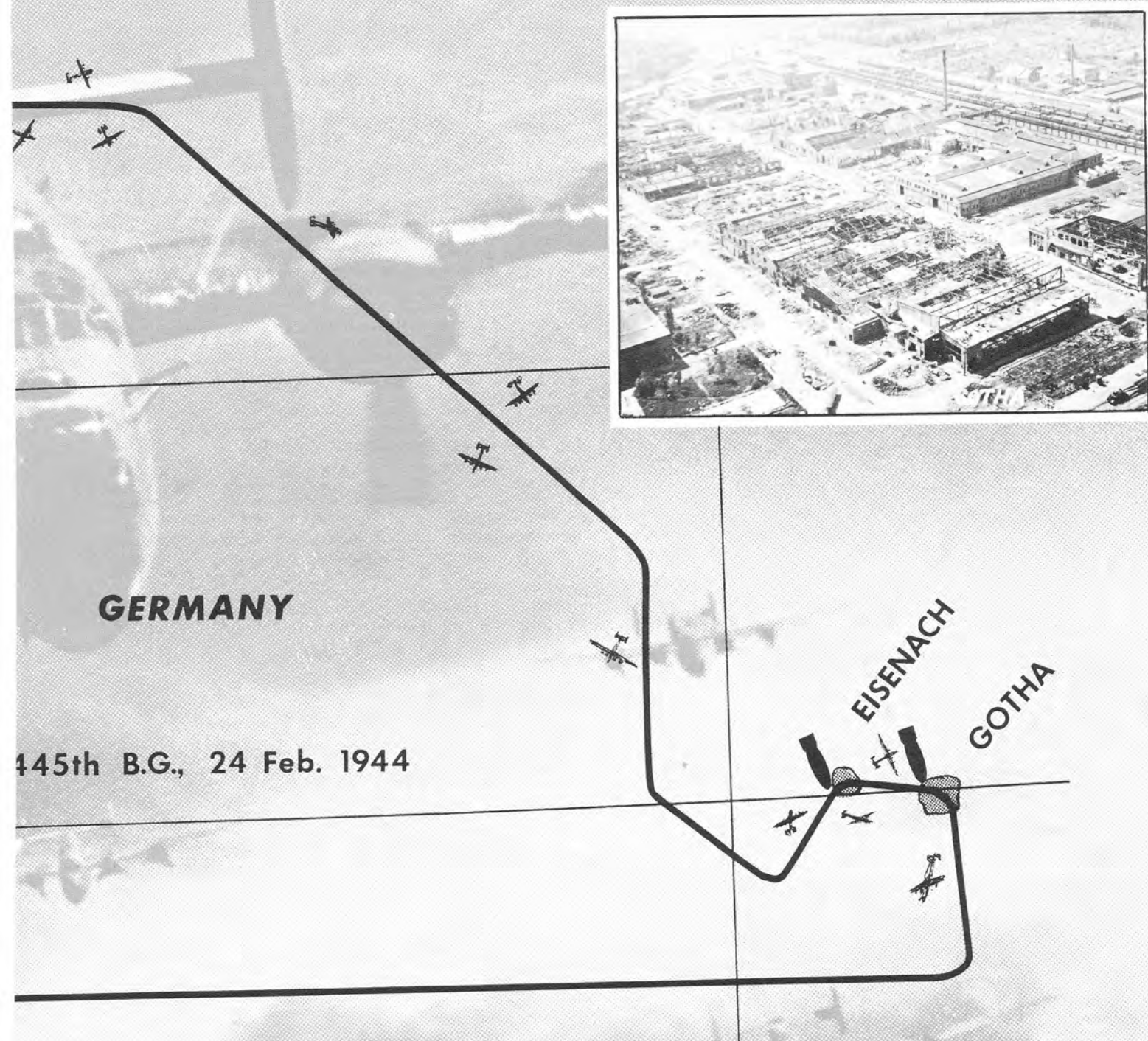
In addition to the 25 shot down then, five more crashed on landing, 236 men were missing, and one dead and 13 wounded were taken from the damaged airplanes that made it to friendly soil.

However, the 445th came home with great honor. In addition to the Distinguished Unit Citation for its mission to Gotha on 24 February 1944, the French Government awarded the Croix de Guerre, two officers received the D.S.C. and Legion of Merit respectively. Individual awards were many: 13 Silver Stars, 60 Bronze Stars, 1041 D.F.C.'s plus 51 Oak Leaf Clusters, 6 Soldier's Medals, 2938 Air Medals with 6409 Oak Leaf Clusters, and 14

CHRONOLOGY

- 11:32 235 B-24's of 2nd A.D. cross coast of Holland
- 12:06 Three groups of P-47's arrive Little Friends
- 12:13 Heavy flak over Lingen
- 12:14 A/c 149 - 700th B.S. shot down
- 12:15 A/c 374 - 700th B.S. shot down
- 12:17 A/c 587 - 700th B.S. shot down
- 12:18 A/c 515 - 701st B.S. shot down
- 12:20 A/c 579 - 701st B.S. shot down
Formation turns south-east at Dammer Lake
- 12:29 Three groups of P-51's arrive for cover
- 12:32 A/c 566 - 702nd B.S. shot down
- 12:45 A/c 517 - 702nd B.S. shot down
- 12:49 A/c 355 - 703rd B.S. shot down
- 12:53 Formation turns south near Gottingen
- 13:02 A/c 440 - 703rd B.S. shot down
- 13:09 Course changed to southeast - 2nd A.D. feints toward Meiningen. 1st A.D. continues on to Schweinfurt
- 13:12 2nd A.D. turns north-east toward secondary target - Eisenach
- 13:13 A/c 130 - 701st B.S. shot down
- 13:14 A/c 364 - 701st B.S. shot down
- 13:14 Eisenach bombed by 25 B-24's of 2nd A.D.
- 13:16 A/c 117 - 702nd B.S. shot down
- 13:18 Two groups of P-51's arrive
- 13:19 Gotha - PRIMARY TARGET - bombed by 171 B-24's
- 13:26 A/c 312 - 701st B.S. shot down
- 13:33 2nd A.D. turns west toward home
- 14:22 2nd A.D. swings north west toward England over Liege.
- 15:45 445th arrives Tibenham





Purple Hearts with 3 Oak Leaf Clusters. The gunners, on whom the very life of each airplane depended, shot down 80 of the enemy aircraft during the bombing missions.

To return to the "Big Week" and the statistics of the raid on Gotha of February 24, 1944, the Group's 25 airplanes were reduced to only 17 as they went over the target, but these dropped almost 180 five-hundred pounders in a critical eight minutes. The results, very considerable damage on the Messerschmitt Me.110 assembly plant as seen by the photograph shown here. The Group was over the target at 1325 hours on a heading of 92 degrees at 12,200 feet. The other groups, lead by the 389th, came in over Gotha at varying courses and altitudes and dropped 468 tons of bombs ranging from 120 lb. fragmentation to 1000 lb. high explosive types.

The totals for the entire week of Feb. 21st to 25th were impressive at that stage of the War: 3,300 airplanes were launched in attacks by the 8th and 15th Air Forces, plus another 2,350 by the Royal Air Force, and in all nearly 10,000 tons of bombs rained down on the enemy. It had been a rare opportunity, at least for that time of the year, when the cloud formations over central Europe were stable and the Allied bombers could go all the way to the target in relatively good weather. After that week the usual very poor weather conditions prevailed over Germany for almost another three months.

On the other hand, the losses were 6 percent, a figure perhaps somewhat lower than calculated. 2,600 aircrewmembers were missing in action at the end of the Big Week, coming from 137 Eighth A.F. bombers, 89 15th A.F. bombers, and 33 fighters. The RAF lost another 157 airplanes of all types engaged in the bombing raids.

The 445th B.G.'s losses for the one day, 24 February, were 13 airplanes with 122 aircrewmembers. The aircraft were numbers 149, 374 and 587 of 700 B.S., Nos. 130, 364, 515, and 578 of 701 B.S., 117, 566 and 517 of 702 B.S. and 312, 335, and 440 of the 703rd. The lead airplane was A/c 117 of the 702nd, with Capt. Henry Bussing as pilot and aircraft commander.

Congratulations on the success of the raid were immediate. Gen. Hodges sent word to Col. Terrill:

HEADQUARTERS, 2nd BOMBARDMENT DIVISION
OFFICE OF THE COMMANDING GENERAL
APO 634

COLONEL ROBERT H. TERRILL, G-18833
COMMANDING OFFICER
445th BOMBARDMENT GROUP
AAF STATION 124

CONFIDENTIAL F-348-A

YOUR GROUP HAS MADE A SUPERB CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEFEAT OF THE ENEMY BY YOUR PERFORMANCE TODAY AGAINST GOTH A AND YOUR SPLENDID EFFORT AGAINST BRUNSWICK LAST SUNDAY. I AM EXCEEDINGLY PROUD TO HAVE A UNIT WITH YOUR FIGHTING SPIRIT AND COMBAT EFFECTIVENESS UNDER MY COMMAND.

HODGES

And in due course the word went forward to Washington; two months later the following General Order citing the Group was sent:

General Order 42
Preamble

War Department
Washington D.C.
24th May 1944

The 445th B.G. (H) 2nd Air Division is cited for outstanding performance of duty in action against the enemy. On 24th February 1944 this group participated with other heavy bombardment groups of the 2nd Air Division, in an attack on the Gothaer Waggonfabriek AG located at Gotha, Germany.

On this occasion the attacking bombers met and overcame the fiercest and most determined resistance the enemy was able to muster in defense of this target, so vital to his ability to wage war.

Unprotected by friendly fighter cover the 445th B.G. was under almost continuous attack from enemy aircraft for a period of 2 hours and 20 minutes. Although anti-aircraft fire was hurled at the formation along the route to and from the target as well at the target itself, the most deadly opposition was given by enemy aircraft.

For 1 hour and 20 minutes before "Bombs away" savage attacks were made by single and twin engined enemy fighters in a vain attempt to keep the bombers from accomplishing their task.

For another hour after the bombing, the group continued to be the object of ferocious fighter attacks. Of this group's 25 aircraft which penetrated enemy territory, 13 were lost to these fierce fighter attacks which number is approximately twice the loss suffered by any of the other groups participating in this mission.

In addition, 9 of the surviving 12 aircraft returned from the mission with battle damage. With heroic determination the 445th B.G. flew its assigned course, destroying 21 enemy attackers, probably destroying 2 more and damaging 7 during the long running battle.

The target was located and bombed with extreme accuracy and devastating results. This target, the most important source of Me110's, was so well hit that the enemy force suffered a most telling blow.

The courage, zeal and perseverance shown by the crew members of the 445th B.G. on this occasion were in accordance with the highest traditions of the military service of the United States and reflect great credit on themselves and the Group, and the Army Air Forces.

By order of the Secretary of War,
G.C. Marshall
Chief of Staff

Official
J.A. Ulio
Major General
The Adjutant General

The statistical breakdown for the 2nd Air Division that day showed:

445th B.G.			
Aircraft sent		28	
Aborting mission		3	
B-24's entering Germany		25	
Bombed target —	Primary	17	(Gotha)
	Secondary	5	(Eisenach)
Lost in combat		13	
Returned to base		12	
Enemy probably destroyed		2	
Enemy damaged		7	
Enemy destroyed		21	
2nd Air Division			
B-24's sent (total)		73	
Over target —	389th B.G.	27	Lost — 0
	445th B.G.	22	Lost — 13
	453rd B.G.	14	Lost — 7
2nd Air Division			
B-24's dispatched		239	Lost — 33
Bombed target —	Primary	171	
	Secondary	25	
Aborted		10	
Fighter escorts*			
P-47's		11 groups	
P-38's		2 groups	
P-51's		2 groups	
Spitfire IX's		8 squadrons	

*The fighter groups were detailed, but, for the purpose of this article it is not known whether the full number of sorties correspondingly were made.

*Ketteringham Hall, Norfolk, six miles southwest of Norwich.
This was the Headquarters of the Second Air Division from
December 1943 to June 1945*



The 2nd Air Division was originally established as the 2nd Bomb Wing in mid-1942, and after the Eighth Air Force, under the command of Major General Carl A. Spaatz, moved to England it was set up at Old Catton, Norfolk, with M/Gen. J.P. Hodges in command. The 2nd A.D. moved to Ketteringham Hall, and the 445th Group went to Tibenham as one of its fourteen bomb groups, organized into five combat wings in November 1942. There were also five fighter groups in the 65th Fighter Wing attached to the Division. M/Gen. W.E. Kepner took command in August 1944.

Major General Ira C. Eaker took command of the 8th Air Force in November 1942, to be followed in December 1943 by M/Gen. James H. Doolittle. As the total Allied aerial might grew, the number of men serving in the 2nd Air Division rose to nearly 50,000. The sacrifice was also great; in the brief period of three years of warfare the 2nd Air Division lost 6,032 men killed and missing action over Europe.

Early in 1945, before hostilities in Europe ceased, the men of 2nd A.D. were giving thought to a memorial in East Anglia to their fallen comrades. The city of Norwich, already launched upon

rebuilding itself from the long war, had under way plans for a new city library, and an appeal leaflet was distributed to all personnel, over the signature of Gen. Kepner, to request funds for a Memorial Room in the library. The initial subscription, collected by May 25th, 1945, was 20,000 pounds, nearly every man in the Division participating. A Memorial Trust was set up with which to endow the library and to supply it with books. The prospective time-table gave a three-year minimum period for construction of the new Memorial Library as a wing on the Norwich City Library.

Time passed. A memorial plaque was erected in November 1945 in Heigham Street (Norwich) to the crew of a B-24 of the 753rd B.S., 445th B.G. who crash landed their airplane deliberately in a field rather than endanger the lives of residents in a large area of cottages in their path. A plaque was erected to mark the spot for the coming 2nd A.D. memorial when it became obvious that the time-table could not be met. The 2nd Air Division Association conventions of 1952 and 1953 reaffirmed the objectives of the Memorial. The size of the memorial donations began to shrink in relation to the plans for the original library wing, and, indeed the City of Norwich was now reducing the cost of the proposed building and its ultimate size.

However, other good things were happening. The Library Trust provided an illuminated Roll of Honor and placed it in custody of the City in 1958, and the Governors of the Trust Fund began to exercise their purpose by making grants for the purchase of American books to be placed in the library. (The latter were housed in the Norwich City College for several years.) The U.S. Third Air Force, based in England, began to assist in sponsoring the Memorial. By 1962 the plans were coming to final shape.

The 2nd Air Division Memorial Room was, in the early months of 1963, the subject of intensive preparations, with stones from every State of the U.S. coming to form the collection in a memorial fountain. The date for the dedication arrived, and with it the president of the 2nd A.D. Association, Percy C. Young, who had

A 445th B.G. Liberator 42-100190, marked as J+ somewhere over East Anglia. Date of photo is 24 Nov. 1944. (USAF No. 62531)





Entrance to the proposed Norwich Central Library as envisaged on the appeal leaflet, 1945



General Kepner, the Lord Mayor (Ald. W. G. Cutbush) and the Chairman of the American Memorial Trust (Ald. E. F. Williamson), inspecting the plaque erected when the original time for the building of the new Library had been exceeded



Memorial to a Liberators crew

served as director of Intelligence at 2nd A.D. Headquarters during the War. General Kepner and Judge Frederick P. Bryan, two of the founding Governors of the Memorial, attended the ceremonies. The following message from President Kennedy was read to the assembled celebrants at a service held at St. Peter Mancroft Church in Norwich:

"On the occasion of the Dedication of this Memorial, I would like to join in paying tribute to the six thousand members of the Second Air Division who sacrificed their lives in the defense of free men everywhere.

"These men and their companions in arms in the Royal Air Force and the United States Army Air Corps were given the hard task of risking the present for the sake of the future. They met the test. May their sacrifice continue to

strengthen the bonds of friendship between our two nations, allies past and present, against tyranny. May it also inspire us to pursue with energy and patience the opportunities for securing peace with justice preserved for us by those whose memorial we dedicate today."

Many of those who had served in the 2nd A.D. were present and there were renewals of friendship and acquaintances from the years 1941 to 1945. The original Eighth Air Force flag was placed on indefinite loan in the new Memorial Room; the Roll of Honor was placed on a pedestal provided by the U.S. Air Base Sculptor. A visit was made to the nearby American Cemetery at Cambridge where many of the six thousand U.S. airmen are buried.

An illuminated copy of the late President Kennedy's message is on



permanent display, with a nearby map of the locations of wartime bases. In the library is a bound copy of the individual histories of the Bomb Groups.

Adjacent to the Memorial Library is a fountain, made with the rocks and stones collected from the fifty States of the Union arranged as a mosaic pattern of the 8th Air Force emblem.

Today the Memorial Trust is under continuing administration, by Governors of the Trust, local (Norwich) Governors, and U.S. Air Force officers nominated by the U.S. Ambassador to the United Kingdom.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author, Geoffrey Watling, of the foregoing articles, Parts 1 and 2 of "Mission to Gotha," provided the basic framework and text before his untimely death in 1970 from complications due to polio. His widow, Mrs. Joyce Watling, has since forwarded much of the illustrative material. We are indebted to John W. Archer, of Earsham, Suffolk, for supplying the booklet, "Second Air Division Memorial, 8th U.S.A.A.F." which describes in detail the founding, rise, and dedication of the Memorial. Photographs were obtained from the Air Force Audio-Visual Detachment with the help of their staff. Editor,

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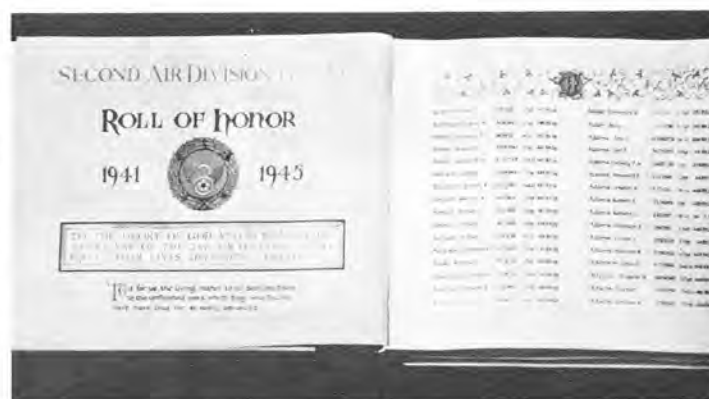
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Opposite page, the American cemetery at Cambridge, England, where many of the 6,032 airmen of the 2nd Air Division are buried.

Top, a Roll of Honor is kept in the Memorial Library of the Norwich City Library, Norwich, England, listing the names of the airmen killed and missing from 2nd A.D. Groups, all of which were based within thirty miles of the City of Norwich.

Right, the 2nd A.D. Memorial Room. The flag on the left is the original 8th Air Force Flag, on loan to the Memorial Trust. The library welcomes donations of books on subjects in history pertinent to the U.S. Army Air Forces in WWII.

(Photos from 2nd Air Division, 8th U.S.A.A.F.)



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