

**Keeping the special relationship in their sights:  
Tracing Anglo-American relationships through the life and times  
of the 398<sup>th</sup> Bomber Group**

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Chewing gum, fine nylon hose, and condoms were the American weapons of occupation in World War Two England. American troops constituted the largest foreign military presence in English history. Three million American troops passed through Britain between 1942 and 1945.<sup>1</sup> Luckily, it was a largely cooperative engagement with casualties like the fox trot and social decorum merely sitting bruised on the sidelines. This paper explores the everyday exchange between the 398<sup>th</sup> Bomber Group of the American Eighth Air Force and their hosts at the air base and village of Nuthampstead, East Anglia, England. In the past two decades, historians of international relations have increasingly sought cultural explanations to augment the existing body of work focusing on geopolitical, economic forces. I submit that the so-called special relationship between Britain and the United States *may* be characterized by unusual economic, political, and military cooperation; however it is also based in intimate experiences between the citizens of the two countries. This paper is part of a larger project which will study post-WWII Anglo-American relations focusing on the contribution of everyday people. Primary sources for this project include interviews, personal correspondence, photographs, records, and newspaper clippings from the 398<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group stationed in England. In addition, the 398<sup>th</sup> currently has an active members association, a web-site, and monthly publications. Secondary sources include current scholarship in this area. This research will add to the growing body of cultural history by showing personal interaction by ordinary citizens also constitutes foreign relations.

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<sup>1</sup> David Reynolds, Rich Relations: The American Occupation of Britain 1942-1945 (New York: Random House, 1995).

The Westphalian System remains the standard introduction to the study of foreign relations. This nation-state world view is the foundation for the realist school, which defines global relations as the interaction between sovereign countries governed by no higher authority.<sup>2</sup> In post Cold War historiographies, some scholars overturned structuralist truths. Charles S. Maier led the charge by suggesting scholars should look at how foreign relations have been conducted on other, more personal levels.<sup>3</sup> Respected authors took up the challenge by looking at the global role of private entities, race, gender, and culture.<sup>4</sup> Historians of Anglo-American relations also embraced the realist school in their interpretations of the alliance. They chronicle political leaders on both sides of the ocean repeatedly reinforcing the traditional idea of the special relationship.<sup>5</sup> Still using the realist paradigm, other historians dispute the idea of a special relationship, and claim the United States is the senior partner in a marriage of convenience.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, many scholars of British history had agreed that simply discussing the theme of the special relationship would inhibit critical analysis.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> George F. Kennan, American Diplomacy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). William Appleman Williams, The Tragedy of American Diplomacy (New York: Dell Publishing, 1972). John Lewis Gaddis, We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Charles S. Maier, "Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era," The American Historical Review Jun. 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Emily S. Rosenberg, Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890-1945 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982) 159. Kristin L. Hoganson, Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). <sup>4</sup> Richard F. Kuisel, Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Michael J. Hogan, The Marshall Plan: America, Britain, and the reconstruction of Western Europe, 1947-1952 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Ritchie Owendale, The English-Speaking Alliance: Britain, the United States, the Dominions and the Cold War 1945-1951 (London: George Allen and UNWIN, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> Robert Garson, "The Atlantic Alliance, Eastern Europe and the Origins of the Cold War: From Pearl Harbor to Yalta," Contrast and Connection: Bicentennial Essays in Anglo-American History, ed. Allen and Thompson (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1976) 296-320.

<sup>7</sup> William Roger Louis and Hedley Bull, The 'Special Relationship': Anglo-American Relations Since 1945 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986) vii-xi.

I believe a key to understanding affairs between the two countries lies in the personal interactions between Britons and Americans. I speculate the special relationship actually exists in everyday lives. Interaction between the citizens of the two countries is rich and on-going. GIs were replaced by tourists, and privately sponsored cultural exchanges that flourished in the 1960s and 70s. Free spirited Americans took trips to Great Britain and never left. Study abroad programs encouraged familiarity and long term interaction between Americans and Britons. Of course these relationships are greatly facilitated by shared language. The effect of this intimacy combines complex feelings of partnership and understanding now and then tempered by annoyance and constructive criticism. It is this salient sentiment of familiarity that is the foundation for the special relationship.

The specific focus for this paper is the post war experiences of the American 8th Air Force's 398<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group and their friends in England. From April 1944 to May 1945 Station 131, near the tiny hamlet of Nuthampstead, was home to the 398th. Station 131 housed the 600<sup>th</sup>, 601<sup>st</sup>, 602<sup>nd</sup>, and 603<sup>rd</sup> squadrons along with the 55<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group. Once the European war ended, the servicemen returned to the US searching for normalcy. Some would occasionally attend an 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force reunion to swap stories and catch up with old friends. After a few years, the 398<sup>th</sup> formalized their own association responsible for organizing reunions, raising funds for memorials, and documenting their history. They continue to produce monthly newsletters, organize reunions, and host a regularly updated website<sup>8</sup>. Its members contributed to an archival depository in both the United States<sup>9</sup> and

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<sup>8</sup> 20 Nov 2006 <<http://www.398th.org>>

<sup>9</sup> 16 Sep 2007 <<http://www.libraries.psu.edu/speccolls/hcla/eighthairforce/index.html>>

in Hertfordshire, England<sup>10</sup>. I chose the 398<sup>th</sup> because of its rich research material, and because this association is not unusual among other groups of American WW II veterans stationed in England. Additionally, the 'UK Friends of the 398<sup>th</sup>' are representative of a larger community of other 'UK Friends' of the WWII veterans.

Before moving into the post-war period, it is essential to understand how important everyday conduct of the American GIs was to the Anglo-American WWII military alliance. Churchill, Roosevelt, Marshall and Eisenhower had a delicate problem to solve. How to manage the largest male invasion of foreigners in British history, especially when Britain's own males were largely elsewhere? From the beginning, the leaders sought to create virtue out of necessity. Churchill encouraged the showing of American films in order to create a public familiarity with Americans.<sup>11</sup> Marshall and Eisenhower enforced rules of conduct designed to diminish confrontation and create positive relations with England's hosts.<sup>12</sup> From the leadership perspective, they had no choice. America was Britain's last hope for repelling the Nazi war machine. If they wanted to defeat Hitler, the two societies had to work together. Churchill was the first to recognize this. He is credited with popularizing the term "special relationship." He needed to convince Britons that they should accommodate the American military presence in their country.

Eisenhower also understood how essential day to day cooperation would be to victory. He mandated those close to him treat their British counterparts as equals. "...he told his staff soon after his arrival in London: 'Gentlemen, we have one chance and only one chance of winning this war and that is in complete and unqualified partnership with

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<sup>10</sup> 27 Nov 2006 <<http://www.hertsdirect.org/libisleisure/heritage1/bombgroup>>

<sup>11</sup> Reynolds, 177

<sup>12</sup> Reynolds, 31-32

the British.’ On his own admission, he became ‘a fanatic’ on the subject, dealing ruthlessly with any infractions. When one offender was sent home for insulting a British officer, the latter interceded: ‘He only called me a son of a bitch sir.’ Ike replied: ‘I am informed that he called you a British son of a bitch. That is quite different. My ruling stands.’<sup>13</sup>

The point here is that the leadership in both countries realized how essential the subaltern was to ultimate success. But the American GIs posed a challenge. They were a non-professional, newly recruited, civilian army. Indeed, base commanders received frequent reminders to enforce military order and discipline. A memo in the personal papers of Col. Earl Berryhill, the Station 131 Executive Officer, includes a stern warning from his commander to enforce proper military conduct. The senior officer explained that discipline is essential for winning the war quickly in order to minimize losses.<sup>14</sup> Clearly, the American military commanders realized their unruly army posed a potential threat to themselves, and to their hosts. For example, lack of discipline and military professionalism often led to rudeness or confrontation with the locals. Orwell makes the description ‘Occupied Territory’ famous because of his supposed encounter with two drunken, destructive GIs terrorizing a London tobacconist.<sup>15</sup> The military and political leadership was sensitive to the damage such negative confrontations could have on the larger war effort. The American Forces Liaison Division and the British-American Liaison Board instituted formal mechanisms for nurturing relations between American GIs and British civilians such as; local hospitality committees which provided invitations to dinner, tours of the local areas,

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<sup>13</sup> Reynolds, 95.

<sup>14</sup> D/ENh/1/2/5 Earl Berryhill’s official papers, Records of the 398<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group (Heavy) (8<sup>th</sup> American Air Force), Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies, Hertfordshire, England

<sup>15</sup> Reynolds, 241

and factory and school visits.<sup>16</sup> While only 2% of the American servicemen established a personal relationship with local families, that number is still roughly 60,000 friendly exchanges.<sup>17</sup> Follow-up reports indicate many of these relationships continue past the war.<sup>18</sup> Sociologically, the American military's presence in Britain is an incredibly complex event. GIs actions were carefully monitored, and semi-successfully constrained. They were an important element in Anglo-American relations.

The American 8th Air Force's 398<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group and their Friends in England provide a microcosm from which to understand how integral everyday actions are to the larger political alliance. From 1944 to 1945, Station 131, near the tiny hamlet of Nuthampstead, was home to the 398th. Once the European war ended, the servicemen returned to the US searching for normalcy. Some would occasionally attend an 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force reunion to swap stories and catch up with old friends. After a few years, the 398<sup>th</sup> formalized their own association responsible for organizing reunions, raising funds for memorials, and documenting their history. They continue to produce monthly newsletters, organize reunions, and host a regularly updated website<sup>19</sup>. Its members contributed to an archival depository in both the United States<sup>20</sup> and in Hertfordshire, England<sup>21</sup>. The 398<sup>th</sup> provides rich research material, and this association is not unusual among other groups of American WW II veterans stationed in England. The 'UK Friends of the 398<sup>th</sup>' are representative of a larger community of other 'UK Friends' of the WWII veterans providing

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<sup>16</sup> Reynolds, 194-197

<sup>17</sup> Reynolds, 170-173

<sup>18</sup> Reynolds, 194-199

<sup>19</sup> 20 Nov 2006 <<http://www.398th.org>>

<sup>20</sup> 16 Sep 2007 <<http://www.libraries.psu.edu/speccolls/hcla/eighthairforce/index.html>>

<sup>21</sup> 27 Nov 2006 <<http://www.hertsdirect.org/libslsleisure/heritage1/bombgroup>>

another dimension to this interpersonal contact and reflecting a larger cultural and societal phenomenon.

The story of the 398<sup>th</sup> Memorial Association actually begins in 1971 in England with three English men, Vic Jenkins, Malcolm "Ozzie" Osborn, and John Knight.<sup>22</sup> The three were searching for American military items on Anstey mound, also the site of medieval castle ruins. They learned from the locals that during WWII a fully loaded bomber dramatically crashed on this mound as it attempted take-off. The whole crew perished. On the day of their search, Knight found the back of a man's watch with the name William L Meyran still legible. Knight soon-after moved out-of-country, however Jenkins and Osborn remained dedicated to the mystery. They corresponded with the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force historians in Alabama searching for the history of Airman Meyran. They were never able to locate his mother, however the two enthusiasts were hooked by the romance and the mystery. They continued to search for cherished artifacts from the airbase. They also researched and documented the history of base activities and personnel. They happened upon an unexpected source of information at the Woodman Inn, a centuries old pub frequented by the airmen during the war. While enjoying a pint, they noticed business cards tacked to a ceiling beam. They recognized some of the names as 398<sup>th</sup> veterans. They wrote asking the Americans if they would not mind sharing their stories and photos. Friendships developed from these correspondences. In short, Jenkins and Osborn became excited experts on the 398<sup>th</sup>. While they researched and documented the events occurring at Station 131, the veterans who actually served there were not formally chronicling their

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<sup>22</sup> Malcolm "Ozzie" Osborn, interview by author, Nuthampstead, England, 21 July 2007



own history. The Britons were the forerunners in resurrecting these events involving the Americans. They named themselves the Nuthampstead Airfield Research Society (NARS). The society's aim was "Quite simply to record the history of the best group in the mighty 8<sup>th</sup>, the 398<sup>th</sup>."<sup>23</sup> They gave presentations to interested audiences at pubs and village halls, augmenting these talks with an informal newsletter describing their latest discoveries.<sup>24</sup> It must have been odd for the American vets to receive a newsletter from a man who was just a child during the war, had no American relatives, yet was more enthused than they were about documenting 398<sup>th</sup> history. At first, they reacted with such indifference to Osborn that in his newsletter to them he pleads for more cooperation.

"When we started researching the group's history some eight years ago we never realized just how much sheer hard work lay ahead, how much information would come to light. But we have made excellent progress, and the editor of this newsletter has two four drawer filing cabinets almost filled, to prove the point. Have not received much help from the majority of the association's members, perhaps they are not interested in us or our work, but have gone ahead regardless and have put the whole story together."<sup>25</sup>

Osborn and Jenkins recreated the history of the 398<sup>th</sup>, initially without input from the actual members. However, when the Eighth Air Force arranged a reunion in England in

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<sup>23</sup> D/ENh/1/5/10 "NARS newsletter no. 2" Nuthampstead Airfield Research Society, Records of the 398<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group (heavy) (8<sup>th</sup> American Air Force), Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies, Hertfordshire, England

<sup>24</sup> D/ENh/1/5/11 "How it all Began," Nuthampstead Airfield Research Society, Records of the 398<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group (heavy) (8<sup>th</sup> American Air Force), Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies, Hertfordshire, England

<sup>25</sup> D/ENh/1/5/10 "NARS newsletter no. 2" Nuthampstead Airfield Research Society, Records of the 398<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group (heavy) (8<sup>th</sup> American Air Force), Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies, Hertfordshire, England

1976, Jenkins and Osborn served as the local guides in Nuthampstead. The two enthusiasts put these connections to good use by promoting the idea of erecting a permanent monument to the 398<sup>th</sup>. The Englishmen lobbied their American friends who eventually organized the 398<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group Memorial Association which registered as a non-profit organization in 1981. The members of the 398<sup>th</sup> then embarked on a three year fundraising campaign to finance the monument. On September 21, 1982, a grand unveiling ceremony revealed a robust marble memorial commemorating the bomber group. Over thirty WWII veterans and their families joined locals who lived during the war, 398<sup>th</sup> enthusiasts, and villagers interested in celebrating the memory of a shared victory. They organized a Sunday Service at St. George's Church in Anstey Village (site of the infamous crash). Osborn and Jenkins even enlisted a local farmer with his small plane to fly the veteran airmen over their home base one last time. For some, it became a powerful moment of closure. Lasting friendships developed from this week-long exchange. The 398<sup>th</sup> vowed to return to Nuthampstead every other year.

Encouraged by the success, the local organizers of the memorial and reunion formally incorporated themselves as the 'The English Friends of the 398<sup>th</sup>.' Their immediate goal was to begin planning for the 1984 reunion. Though members of this group have shifted, the organization remains in tact today. The last formal reunion of the 398<sup>th</sup> in England was in 2002 with the realization that the few veterans remaining were becoming too frail to make the trip. However, the relations continue. The English Friends of the 398<sup>th</sup> play a unique role by providing a path to the past for surviving family members. When children, grandchild, nieces and nephews go to Nuthampstead searching

for insight into the seldom discussed personal history of their fathers, grandfathers and uncles, they are greeted by well informed Britons who interpret the experiences of the veterans. While they pride themselves on historical accuracy, they are free to romanticize and embellish, making the British once again in control of a past war which they may have lost if it were not for American involvement.

While Station 131 housed about a thousand men, it must be remembered there were roughly three million American military personnel in Britain. The story of the 398<sup>th</sup> and their 'English Friends' is repeated exponentially. One may wonder why such enthusiasm remains into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Malcolm Osborne explained his feelings regarding American WWII veterans which I found both interesting and enlightening. He said:

"I do not think they fully realised the effect they had on the English during 1942-45 - an effect so powerful that even today they are remembered with such love and true affection. They [do not] realise that all over East Anglia there are enthusiasts determined to preserve their exploits. Such commitment has been recognised by all of the [Friends] Associations over the last 35 years... I love all those old veterans, I am in total awe of them. I know we shall never forget what they did for us."<sup>26</sup>

Osborn passionately believes in his mission to memorialize American WWI veterans.

Their importance continues. Today however, the GI veterans embrace a new role as informal diplomat. And, the English tradition of local hospitality remains strong. Children and grandchildren who travel to Nuthampstead know they will be warmly welcomed by the

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<sup>26</sup> Malcolm Osborne, email to author, Independence, MO, 19 August 2007

friends of the 398<sup>th</sup>. With its impressive collection of photos and memorabilia, the Woodman Inn remains the epicenter of 398<sup>th</sup> memory. In July 2007 I visited Nuthampstead. Malcolm Osborn enthusiastically provided a tour of the area and generously shared his research findings. He remains a local expert on all things 398<sup>th</sup>. As we sat over lunch, the Woodman Inn owner approached Osborn to relay a message that someone from the Museum of Transport wanted to speak with him about the 398<sup>th</sup>. Even though Osborn is important to this story, it must be stated that dozens of others on both sides of the Atlantic remain committed to preserving the memory of shared victory.<sup>27</sup>

In this case study, foreign relations occurs continuously between those on both sides of the Atlantic connected to the 398<sup>th</sup> Bomber Group. The American GIs stationed in England during the war posed particular management problems for the leadership in both militaries. The commanders understood how valuable positive interactions between the American servicemen and their English hosts could be. And now, decades after the war, American veterans willingly participate in commemorating the shared victory. While the impact of their actions may not be apparent at the system level, their everyday lives genuinely reinforce a special relationship. I propose that even today lessons can be learned from this intentional and coordinated policy of cultural interaction. Military leaders who implement constructive person to person relations also lay positive, sympathetic foundations for generations to come. The value of the subaltern should not be overlooked in foreign relations.

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<sup>27</sup> FLAK news, Allen Ostrom, 18 August 2007 <<http://www.398th.org>>

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