

Humanity During War

I- Stories From England

Earl Eugene Wassom:

Wassom and his group came to know a young British boy named Eddie Brighty, who lived near their base. Eddie was the delivery boy for his mom since she did the airmen's laundry for them. Eddie often waited for the men to return from missions in their barracks and keep their stove fires going. As the weeks passed, Eddie bonded with the airmen as the men enjoyed getting to know him. Wassom described him as "a neat little kid, shiny eyes, and an instant smile. He was very fair, blue-eyed. He would always have something to say." Around December of 1944, Wassom asked Eddie if there was anything he would want for Christmas, to which Eddie replied, "a black bicycle with shiny rims and a front, rear-wheel brake handle."¹ After talking with Eddie about the bike, he and his co-pilot decided to go to Norwich to search the stores for a suitable bike.

After some time searching the shops on Castle Street, the two men came upon a "deplorable" used junk store. Wassom was amazed at all of the stuff that cluttered the store, and he began to think that it was unlikely that the shop owner would have a newer bike to sell. When they met the owner of the shop, Wassom described the kind of bike they were looking to buy. At first, the shop owner was not keen on selling what he had until the airmen told them that it was for a young boy near their airbase. After convincing him, the English man went into the back of the store and brought out a bike that was nearly identical to how Eddie described the bike he wanted. The man asked one last time, "Are you sure this is for a little English Kid?" Wassom promised him that it was for a good cause, and after paying for the bike, the airmen went back to

¹ Pages eleven and twelve in Earl Wassom's interview, May 16, 2002.

the base. Even though Christmas was a couple of days away but the crew could not keep the secret, and they told Eddie that they got him a bike as a present.



Figure 1 Photograph of Earl Wassom's crew. Wassom is on the far left on the back row.

Norman L. Sisson:

Sisson was a B-17 bomber pilot assigned to the 401st bomb group in the 416th squadron. During a furlough to London, he was walking in the streets when a V-2 rocket hit close by his location. He quickly went into a shelter where he found himself sitting across from a “real pretty girl.” He gave her a charming smile, and she smiled back at him, and he thought that he would

like to get to know her. When another bomb hit the ground, she came and sat by him until the salvo had ended. After the all-clear, Sisson said, "I would sure like to get your name and number." And she shot back, "Yank, I am not looking for a boyfriend. I was just scared. I was looking for someone to comfort me."² He jokingly reminisced that he missed out on having her as his London girlfriend.

Willmore Fluman:

Fluman was a bomber pilot who landed at an RAF base when they were returning from a called off mission. He stated how the RAF pilots were great and treated him well. He also noted that his men devoured the tea and crumpets that the British set out for all the airmen. He was embarrassed, but he said the RAF boys took it rather well and were courteous about it.

Carelton Earl Gillmore:

Gillmore, before he was shot down on a mission, spent some time with his crew on leave in London. He said that he was unprepared for his time visiting Piccadilly Circus, as groups of female prostitutes mobbed the airmen.³ Other crews had warned him about them, but he had assumed that they were exaggerating or being funny with him. He was mainly dumbstruck by the various ages of the women following the group around the square. The men managed to get away from the ladies and walk by a man selling newspapers and condoms to passerby's, which also shocked Gillmore.⁴ He told Dr. Rogers-Price that the English had a saying that the

² Pages eleven and twelve in Sisson, Norman L. Sisson oral history transcript, October 16, 2003.

³ Carleton stated that as he grew up in a fundamentalist church and was not used to seeing situations like this back home.

⁴ Pages seven and eight of Carelton Gilmore's oral history transcript, October 21, 2002.

Americans in England were “overpaid, oversexed, and over here.” During his leaves in London, he saw how much damage the city had suffered the German Luftwaffe’s numerous bombing runs. He found their attitude of life inspiring as they were doing well even though the city was in a state of destruction. Gillmore said, “They weren’t downcast. They were not the least bit ready to give up anything. They laughed, and they were a hearty bunch.”

Norman Grant:

Grant, before being shot down on a mission, made friends with an English family that lived near the airbase he was stationed. They were Lord and Lady Neat, and Lord Neat was known for a book on Nelson that he had written some time before the war.⁵ One Sunday afternoon, Grant with four officers of the crew were walking near the airbase. They managed to get into a conversation with the Neat’s, where the couple invited them to an American style Sunday dinner the following Sunday. When the airmen arrived at the Neat’s estate, they were served bacon, eggs, toast, and coffee for dinner. To Grant, that was breakfast food, but he didn’t mind it since they rarely got good breakfasts on the airbase. As they were eating, the Lord and Lady began to ask the airmen questions about their backgrounds and what their parents did in the states.

The men were unsure how to answer, as they knew this couple came from a class conscious culture. Grant’s pilot, George Washington, told them that his father was “in oil.” This answer made sense to the airmen as they know the meaning of that colloquialism, but Lord Neat took that it meant his father was prospecting for oil. This set the stage for the rest of the men to tell their stories in an “upgraded” manner. The co-pilot said that his father was in the government

⁵ The Nelson referred to in the interview is Lord Horatio Nelson, one of the most famous Admirals in British history.

service, without mentioning that he was just a typical mailman.⁶ After lunch, the group moved outside to hang around the swimming pool, where Lord Neat occasionally swam to work out and help his polio. As they were sitting around the pool, Lady Neat and her daughter asked the men what kind of tea they would like to drink. Grant was unsure how to respond since the only tea he drank was Lipton, so the two women began to debate whether they should make the China or Hindu Tea. The airmen did not provide any helpful answer, so the ladies prepared them the tea; Grant did not remember which kind it was. This dinner was the only time he was able to visit the Neat's estate, as they were shortly shot down during a bombing raid.

⁶ This story is expanded upon further on page five of Norman Grant's oral history transcript, October 25, 2001.

