

Comments Regarding Art Graham's WWII Mural

The planes that flew from Airfield 162, in England, were B-26 tactical bombers of the 9th Air Force, which invariably flew their missions in daylight, as did all U.S. bombers, while the British concentrated on night bombings, thus providing round the clock bombardment of the enemy.

I did not have an intimate relationship with the planes, nor their crews, as I served as a medic to a part of the ground crew at an aid station some distance from "The Line", which was what we called the airstrip.

Nevertheless, it was always impressive to see the planes take off in the distance and circle overhead until their formation was created and they headed South with their payloads for Hitler. Subdued attitudes then seemed to pervade the field until some hours later when they would return and we would study the formation to try and determine if any were missing. The silhouette of a returning formation is shown above the distant horizon in the drawing.

The bomber commander and senior commander officer of Airfield 162, was a Colonel whom I saw only once when he welcomed our service group to his command the day after our arrival. I still remember him likening his flyers to infantrymen on the front lines every time they flew a mission. His second in command was a gaunt-faced, somber Lieutenant Colonel who later died in a crash some miles from the airfield while flying alone. I have often wondered if it was an intentional crash.

The enclosed picture of the B-26 with the white stripes around its body and wings could only have been taken on or after D-Day, June 6, 1944. That was the day on which our medical detachment was probably the only soldiers on the field to greet the day after a normal night's sleep.

We showed up at the mess hall to find that everyone else at breakfast was splattered from head to toe with white paint as they had been up all night painting those white stripes on every plane on the field in last minute preparation for the invasion. That procedure took place at every airfield in the United Kingdom that night and probably saved many aircrew lives during the assault. It was a brilliant idea and assured there would be no misidentification of our aircraft, and the crowning touch was to hold off until the last minute and catch the enemy unawares.

Behind the silhouette skyline in the drawing, is a barrage balloon, a familiar sight in London. These hydrogen-filled balloons were shaped like small dirigibles, about 70 feet long, and floated a few hundred feet above the buildings, being anchored to the ground or buildings or other structures and had cables or netting hanging from them. Their function was to protect against air attacks, particularly low flying strafing.

I mention this because a “companion” mural was painted by my friend, Joshua Clark, at the opposite end of the hall depicting these wartime creations in a symbolic way. His mural pictured faceless GI’s disembarking from a ship, with barrage balloons on their backs, actually floating through the air to the pier. The message being that with the joy of returning home, our duffle bags would be as light as balloons. I felt it was too arty and poorly painted and I didn’t like it at all, but I never told him so, or anyone else for that matter.

If you look closely, you will see six faint pencil lines evenly spaced, three horizontal and three perpendicular. These form a grid that helped me in transferring the images to the final painting in their proper relationship.

Arthur Graham

Clifton Park, New York

April, 2003, in my 81st year