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Building-up to D-Day

By Suzie Harrison, American Battle Monuments Commission, Cambridge American Cemetery and Memorial

The inter-war period was a time of military expansion in Germany – not so in Britain (apart from the Navy). The late 1930s, being the ‘age of appeasement’, Britain found any excuse not to get involved in another war, but she reluctantly began to re-arm. Then, on September 3rd, 1939, after the invasion of Poland, she declared war on Germany.

For well over two years, supported only by Commonwealth troops and limited forces belonging to the Free-armies of allies such as the French, Polish and Czechs, Britain practically stood alone in Europe against the Nazi war machine. Being an island nation, she suffered from dwindling resources and lack of food. America was inward looking; not wanting to be involved in ‘old world’ wars. However, President Roosevelt signed the

Lend-Lease bill into law (11 March 1941), giving him the power to lend arms and goods to Britain. It was to be paid back in kind - a debt of honour, which was considered cleared in 2006.

The events of December 7th, 1941 finally brought the USA into the war. The attack on Pearl Harbor awoke a sleeping giant. Within the European Theatre of Operations the Americans determined that:

- The key to Europe was the UK.
- If the UK was lost, Europe would be lost.
- The UK was dependent on ships to help keep its routes of communication and supply open.

The Battle of the Atlantic was the longest of WWII. Convoys of supply ships, escorted by military vessels, sailed in the face of dangerous threats from German

U-boats. Aboard a US Coast Guard cutter were two aviators, Lt John A Pritchard and RN1C Benjamin Bottoms. Their Grumman seaplane would be lowered onto the water by crane. They would then fly off in search of survivors from vessels sunk by the enemy. In November 1942, landing on the Greenland icecap, they rescued three crewmen from a downed B-17 Flying Fortress. Weather conditions were rapidly worsening, but they returned for the fourth airman, only to disappear before reaching the safety of their ship. Both are commemorated on the Wall of the Missing at Cambridge American Cemetery. (in 2014, the Coast Guard Academy inducted Pritchard into its prestigious Hall of Heroes).

Britain was to become the largest logistical supply base of all military history.



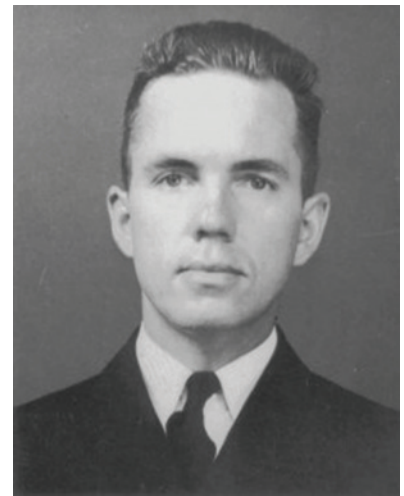
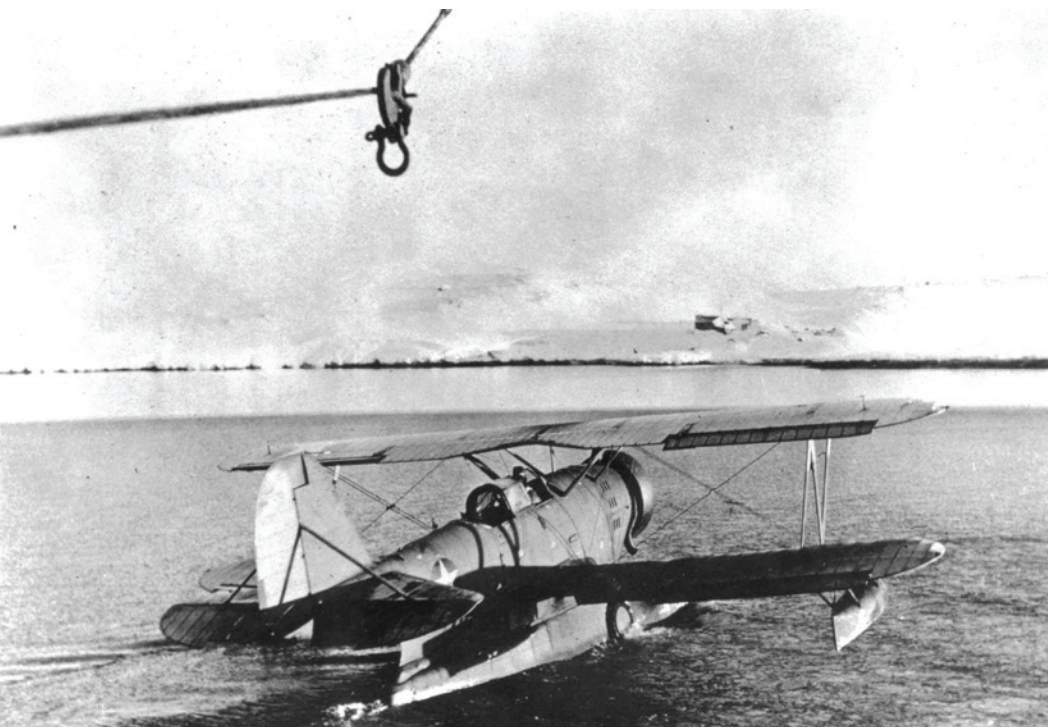
ROBERT LAMAR JR
PVT 829 ENGR BN (AVN)
ARKANSAS NOV 18 1942

JOHN A. BALL JR
BORN 20 01 BOMB OF ILL
MISSI NOV 23 1942



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Left: Lt John Pritchard's Grumman Duck in the icy waters of Greenland before taking flight on his final rescue mission
Above: Lt John A Pritchard official portrait
Below: Radioman 1st Class Benjamin A Bottoms.

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Troops, supplies and equipment arrived weekly. No one knew the date of D-Day, but after the horrors of Dunkirk, they knew they had to be prepared. The Americans realised that the British could provide nothing, so they had to bring every nut and bolt with them...and the spanner to do them up!

The US launched the strategic air war from the east of England. Unfortunately, weather in Britain was unlike the sunny skies of Arizona and California, where aircrews had trained. Fighter aircraft can take off from grass fields in dry summer weather, but heavy bombers certainly need hardstanding and a concrete runway.

Initially, US forces were 'lodgers' at RAF airfields. With the 8th Air Force to the east, requiring bases from which to strike at the industrial heartlands of mainland Europe, and the Troop Carrier Groups of the 9th Air Force to the north, preparing to drop Paratroopers on D-Day, more airfields were needed.

The flat lands of East Anglia were ideal for this huge construction project which provided a further 126 US AAF Stations, each capable of accommodating 3,000 men. Britain was humorously referred to as, 'America's aircraft carrier'.

It was the Engineering Battalions (Aviation), often composed of African-American soldiers serving in segregated 'Black Units', who built them. The courage and competence of these men, frequently living in tented camps, working in dirty and dangerous conditions, was amazing. With the RAF also building airfields, a new base

was springing up every 8 miles, taking a mere 6-9 months to completion.

Asked about his war service, one black engineer said:

'Our task did not require us to engage with the enemy ... we felt a closeness for the combat men of the Air Corps and ... were playing a part in paving the way to victory.'

Soon the Americans were everywhere ... waiting! ★

We at Cambridge American Cemetery welcome you all to our Memorial Day Ceremony on Monday May 27th, 10.45 for 11.00am. There is ample parking.

Below: Members of an aviation engineer battalion construct a heavy bomber airfield near Eye, Norfolk, England, in 1943.

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