Chapter 5

THE BUILDUP

— BRINSON'S HISTORY —

By late March, there were many signs that indicated that a cross-Channel invasion could not be too far in the future. In addition to the five groups that comprised the 52nd Troop Carrier Wing which had just come to England from the Mediterranean, two additional troop carrier wings, the 50th and 53rd, with nine other troop carrier groups had been arriving in the United Kingdom since late 1943.

Spanhoe Airfield, the new home of the 315th, located in northwest Northhamptonshire between the villages of Harringworth and Laxton, was a typical British airfield of the type constructed during the war years. There were three intersecting runways, one of 6,000 feet aligned with the prevailing wind, and two shorter runways 4,200 feet in length. All runways were 150 feet wide. A perimeter track encircled the runways and spaced along this perimeter track were fifty "loop type" hardstands where the planes were parked. Most hardstands could accommodate at least two aircraft. On the south side of the airfield, and not too far from the runways, were two large metal hangers where second echelon maintenance was accomplished. On each ide of the approximately quarter mile road between the two hangers were most of the administrative offices, supply buildings, the Operations Building and briefing rooms, a parachute loft, and the motor pool.

Going south from the east-west country road which bisected the arr station was another hard-surfaced road which led to the village of Deene. Alongside this road were the living sites, most of them positioned in and around Spanhoe Wood. This area comtained Nissen huts of various sizes that served as living quarters, mess halls, dubs, and orderly rooms for the various squadrons. Nissen huts were used as; living quarters usually contained three rooms - two smaller ones facing each other across a short corridor at one end of the hut which could accommodate one or two people each, and a larger room at the other end of the building which could take a considerable number of beds and foot lockers. All rooms were heated with small coal or coke burning stoves that required a great amount of skill in making them produce enough heat. Bathing facilities were located in one or more buildings in the living sites.

Less than two weeks after the 315th planes and crews arrived at Spanhoe, they were joined by 26 planes and crews that also came from the Mediterranean Theater of Operations. One half of this cadre came from the 60th Troop Carrier Group and the other from the 62nd Troop Carrier Group. ℮ See Appendix 3) The officers and men in these two cadres were attached to the 34th and 43rd Squadrons until 26 April when the 309th and 310th Troop Carrier Squadrons were assigned to the 315th, the squadron numbers transferred from a group in the U.S., minus planes and personnel.

Some of the men who came to the 315th from the 60th and 62nd had participated in airborne missions in North Africa, Sicily and Italy. Captain Edwin Titsworth had been decorated twice, as had Sergeants H.R. Barrett and W. L. Craves. Sergeants Barrett, Black, Craves, Rise, and Stacker from the 60th had flown combat missions as had Captain Adams, Lieutenants Worley, Rawls, *Moss*, Melucas, O.J. Smith, Colwell, Sergeants Raskie, Davidson, Collison, Denton, and Peterman from the 62nd to list a few. All men were volunteers, and they were excellent additions to the 315th.

For the first time since leaving Florence, S. C., eighteen months earlier, the 315th Troop Carrier Group possessed the normal compliment of four squadrons. Major Smylie C. Stark moved from Group Headquarters to take command of the 309th Squadron and Major Henry G. Hamby, Jr. assumed command of the 310th. A handful of the 43rd Squadron personnel, plus most of the aircrews who came from the 60th, went into the 309th; the 310th was a mixture of the crews from the 62nd and air crew members and support personnel moving from the 34th Squadron.

By 2 April, the 315th possessed 61 C-47s, 30 CG-4A gliders, and five British Horsa gliders. Ten older C-53s were transferred to a theater air transport squadron (operating from Heston, Warton, and Prestwick), as new C-47s were delivered at Spanhoe by ferry pilots. These new additions, when combined with the crews who had joined the English-based 315th in late 1943 and early 1944, soon enabled each squadron to have more than 18 aircraft and crews

The 818th Medical Evacuation Squadron with 25 nurses arrived at Spanhoe on 4 April. '10 the regret of

many, the unit's stay at the base was: short-lived. Not so short, however, that several of the nurses later consented to be married to members of the 315th.

The 315th had a large contingent of glider pilots who had been arriving during the past several months. Even though the 315th never participated in a combat operation with gliders, most of the glider pilots remained with the Group during the remainder of its stay in Europe. Usually they were placed on detached service with another troop carrier group that was towing gliders on a particular operation. The job of a glider pilot was not an easy one. Not only did he have to fly his loaded glider to a designated landing zone and land it safely, but then he had to be an infantryman until he could make his way back to a collection point behind the lines and eventually be sent back to his assigned unit.

To occupy their time when not training, many glider pilots volunteered for other jobs within their squadrons, occasionally flew as co-pilots in the C-47s, and became assets to the units in many other ways. Captain B. T. Wheeler and Captain Richard Bettis were the Group's Glider Operations Officer and Glider Engineering Officer, respectively.

Other personnel changes occurred during the spring. Major C. O. Braden, a balloon observer during World War I and the oldest officer assigned to the group, departed for the U.S. after an illness of several months. Captain W. W. Fry moved from the 34th to become Group Adjutant. Captain S. W. Suttle, Lieutenant F. E. Hayden, Lieutenant J. W. Alwood, and Technical Sergeant Morris Brown went to the recently formed Troop Carrier Command Pathfinder Group at North Witham.

Whenever weather permitted, formation flying or glider towing was scheduled, and on the night of 10 April, night formation flying commenced There was always a critique after each mission to try and improve procedures and technique. Discussions about airspeeds being too slow or too fast and "stacking" of flights at the rear of the formations were two of the main problems. Performances improved as more experience was gained.

Group school training classes were also begun in earnest. Some of the subjects that the Group was required to teach appeared useless, but much attention was given by crew members to escape and evasion procedures, and interest was renewed in aircraft ditching techniques. The navigators were occupied learning the intricacies of the new "Rebecca" radar sets being installed in the aircraft.

Beginning in May, joint troop carrier/airborne exercises stepped up in pace. On the 6ih, the group provided 48 aircraft to drop elements of the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR) in Exercise "TUCK." This was followed on 8 May by another practice exercise when the Group dropped 874 troops of the 505ih PIR near Leicester at dusk. On 10/11 May, exercise Eagle was mounted. This practice mission was the closest thing to a dress rehearsal for the coming invasion that the Group experienced. EAGLE was a night mission of almost six hours duration with takeoff at 2248 and landing after 0430. From everyone's viewpoint, it was considered unsatisfactory. The beacons on the drop zone (9 miles east of Divizes, in Wiltshire) were malfunctioning at the time the planes arrived and the group of paratroopers aboard were unable to jump because of no positive identification in the jump area. It was on this exercise that Flight Officer Hubert Bayless, who had been with the 315th since Florence but who had transferred to the 316th only a week or two earlier, was killed in a midair collision over the base at Cottesmore. A few other paratroop drops were made on a token basis up to 16 May. All were more successful than EAGLE.

The last week in May, Group Engineering received numerous gallons of both black and white paint. Confidential instructions were issued to the four squadron engineering sections to be ready on short notice to mark all aircraft. Three white and two black stripes, each stripe two feet wide were to be painted around the fuselage just forward of the tail section. The same pattern was to be painted on the top and bottom of each wing. Once the aircraft were painted, they were to be grounded until further notice. The "GO" signal for the painting was received on 3 June ‘44, and the squadron engineering personnel, chided into competition by Sergeants George White and Sollie Grasmick from the Group Engineering Section, worked continuously until all aircraft were marked.

On 1June ‘44, the airfield at Spauhoe was "sealed." No one was allowed oft' bas«, all passes were canceled, and all personal phone calls were prohibited. Non-official mail was placed in bags and stored. Paratroopers from the 505th PIR, 82nd

Airborne Division, stationed at Leicester, began arriving at Spanhoe two days later. They set up cots in one of the hangers and strung barbed wire around the area of the airfield allotted to them. Around the same time, 315th crew members scheduled for the upcoming mission were issued "escape kits" containing special instructions, cloth maps, and a limited number of French Francs. These kits were welcomed. Not welcomed were a set of special coveralls impregnated with an oily and strong smelling substance which was supposed to be worn on the mission. The impregnated suit was said to offer protection against certain gasses the enemy might use.

The weather forecast for 5 June postponed planned operations for 24 hours, but on the evening of 4 June General Eisenhower made the decision that the invasion of France (Operation OVERLORD) would take place on the 6th. The paratroops, advanced guard of the Allied Forces, would take off from English airfields on the evening of 5 June. The mission of the 82nd Airborne Division, of which the 505th PIR was part, was to secure the western edge of the bridgehead and, which the Allies hoped to establish, by capturing the town of Ste, Mere Eglise, a key point on the road to Cherbourg.

Early in the afternoon of 5 June, the pilots, co-pilots, and navigators were assembled in the Pilots' Lounge. (The crew chiefs and radio operators were briefed separately.) Major General Matthew B. Ridgway, who commanded the 82nd Airborne Division, and who was scheduled to jump with the 505th, was present. When all were present, Colonel Mcl.elland announced that the long expected mission was scheduled for that evening. Lieutenant Colonel Gibbons then revealed the map on the wall and pointed out our destination a drop zone northwest of the town of Ste. Mere Eglise on the Cherbourg Peninsula in Normandy. Over 800 American troop carrier aircraft would participate in the mission, airlifting over 13,000 US paratroopers and glidermen. Additional planes from the British 38 Group and 46 Group would take in the British airborne troops. All necessary information concerning the mission of the troop carriers was fully covered, and few questions were asked

at the briefing's conclusion. Pilots went from the briefing to meet and have discussions with the jumpmasters on their respective planes. The total load for the 315th's 48 aircraft was 844 paratroopers and 41,236 pounds of equipment.

All that was left to do until the balloon went up later in the day was to wait. ~

Welcome to Spanhoe, the 818th Medical Air Evac Squadron

(Top Row: L-R) Evelyn Chaychuk ("Cappie"), Lola Bain, Cordelia White, Phyllis Heintz, Catherine Dries, Anne Beneshunas, Josephine Crawford, Marjorie Payne, Katherine Shumpert.

(Middle Row) Eleanor Lofthouse, Alice Krieble, Margaret O'Toole, Jane Zuern, Velma Scholl, Katherine Bannigan, Delores Rue, Wilhelmina Dunker, Inez Leland

Bottom Row: Selma Kaye, Vivianna Cronin, Goldie Harvey,

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THE BUILD UP
— CHOLEWCZYNSKI'S "VOICES" —

Lt. Colonel Henry Hamby
Commander, 310th Troop Carrier Squadron

Two new squadrons were being formed for the 315th. Before we left North Africa, we also had aircrew transferred from the 60th and 62nd Troop Carrier Groups. The 309th was formed from the 43rd and men from the 60th Troop Carrier Group. The 310th received men from the 34th, and the 62nd, Troop Carrier Group. I was to command the 310th. Major Smylie Stark got the 309th Troop Carrier Squadron. This was a happy coincidence; Smylie and, I were both from Kentucky. We were together on the same train from Ft. Knox to Dallas for flight school. We stayed together in flight school and then went to Middletown PA in the same

outfit. We stayed together overseas the whole time. We were of equal rank, as when we were promoted the dates of rank were the same. When the two squadrons were formed, we were at the top of the list of eligibility and we got them.

When we were picking men from the old squadrons, we picked out who we wanted, and then had arguments with the squadron we were taking them from. Maybe it might have been easier just to put names in a hat, but it came out all right.

1st Sergeant William Nagle
310th Troop Carrier Squadron

I had been bumped from my slot as 1st sergeant in Group Headquarters when they abolished the slot. I was fortunate that when the 34th's 1st: sergeant was promoted to warrant officer, I was able to transfer in grade. I was; there for over a year, when Major Hamby came in and said, "I've got one of the new squadrons. How would you like to be my 1st sergeant?" I told him "Lead me to it," and became the first shirt for the brand new 310th Troop Carrier Squadron.

2nd Lieutenant Inez A. Leland (Mrs. Inez Glass, "Queenie")
818th Medical Aero Evacuation Squadron

I had already finished nursing school and received my RN after a three year practical course at Tacoma General Hospital. I then joined the Nurse Corps and they called for volunteers to be Flight Nurses. I joined. It was scary going out to Madigan Army Hospital to take our physicals. Lois Modeland and I went together. When we had to board the train, that was kind of scary too .We didn't know much, we hadn't been around much. We got aboard the train, saying good bye to the family and everybody cried, not knowing whether we'd come home again. Those were scary times, but it turned out all right.

Our ship arrived in Scotland on April 3, 1944. It was all very exciting We didn't know for sure where we were, and then we heard them playing the bagpipes, and then we saw Captain Mills, one of the doctors in our squadron, and some of the other guys. They were singing, "Bless Them All." We were so excited to see the boys there, because we were separated from the rest of our staff We nurses went separate and didn't know for sure whether the others had made it. A couple of the ships in the convoy had turned back. We were so glad to see them and they gave us hugs as we got off of the ship and got on a train and traveled down to Spanhoe.

Spanhoe was new at the time and we were quartered in Nissen huts. We didn't mind, we kind of liked to rough it a little. There weren't any closets or anything, but we kind of made do. But the stoves were awful. They never gave us enough coke to make the hut anywhere near warm.

Major J.S. Smith
Operations Officer, 34th Troop Carrier Squadron

When the Air Echelon returned from North Africa, we found much new. There was a new base, Spanhoe, plus new and updated C-47s for the weary ones that had carried us so far and so safely thanks to our dedicated and skilled maintenance crews. And there was a new mission. It involved the product of some really wacky aircraft designer who had dreamed up a blunt nosed boxy craft with wings reaching out to forever, but NO FNCTNES. Along with it were officers wearing wings, the crest of which bore a large "G"." Our task, we learned, was to tie long ropes to our tails and pull those fabric covered mistakes into the air.

Of course we knew about gliders, how the Germans employed them in Holland and Crete, and that several Troop Carrier Groups were training with them. But it was new and not particularly welcome to those of us who came over with the 315th and lacked any experience with gliders. As I recall, we would have been just as happy to leave it that way. For those aircrews who- joined later, towing gliders was a routine part of the job

So we started moving up the learning curve. After proving we could successfully tow a CG4A, (for that was their designation) someone said "try: two at a time." And we did. And we began asking, "OK, so without getting killed first, you put down in some Jerry-surrounded pasture ... what happens next?" The answer was; "grab a gun and get in the fight." Escape and Evasion was not in their lexicon. It became startlingly clear this was a bunch of mighty gutsy guys. Respect began to flow, along with, perhaps, a bit of awe.

After the Normandy drop and the following breakout, any opportunity to work with the glider contingent was practically nil. The Group was too heavily tasked in support of the advancing Allies. A maximum effort each day was the norm. With heavy demand on aircrews, a number of glider pilots willingly filled in as co-pilots.

The 315th never pulled gliders into combat. However, many of the Group's glider pilots, placed on temporary duty, participated in major combat operations with other organizations

Captain Bernard Coggins
Navigator, 43rd Troop Carrier Squadron

We immediately began a training program preparing us for what was to come in the not too distant future. Not only were we dropping American paratroopers on practice drops, we were dropping British paratroopers on occasion, and we even towed gliders. Not just a single tow, but on occasion we did double tows. We all did not want to get involved in a glider mission when, and if, the invasion came. We just didn't like glider towing.

Major J.S. Smith
Operations Officer, 34th Troop Carrier Squadron

We had been steadily training since returning months before from North Africa. The training told us that whatever was going to happen would most likely be in the dark. Night formation flying had been the focus. It was new and challenging, holding position guided only by a few shaded lights on the wings and fuselages of those in your element. But we believed we were ready. For what, we weren't sure.

Major William Brinson
Group Engineering Officer

We were flying a mission, Operation EAGLE. It was a dress rehearsal, I remember, for the D-Day Operation, and I was flying co-pilot for the Group's Deputy CO, HB Lyon. I do remember that it was generally a fiasco according to the higher-ups of those days, particularly Troop Carrier Command. It was one of the blackest nights I have ever seen in my life. Not a star was seen, not a light was seen on the ground. This flight was over five hours long, and the only lights we had were some new-fangled small formation lights on the wings of the airplanes that were still in the neophyte stage, as I recall.

Sometime along during the second hour of the flight, we both began to experience a sense of vertigo. HB suggested that we each fly about ten minutes and then alternate. Never again, or since, in my years of flying have I again had such a sense of disorientation. It came in waves that dark night, something that anyone who has ever experienced vertigo understands.

Much later he told me that he had experienced the same sensation but he knew what we had to do. For three hours we alternated, every ten minutes he put his head down and tried not look at anything. If he was rattled, he never showed it by either word or deed. On that night, which seemed to be interminable for me, his only comment after landing was, "That was pretty long, wasn't it?"

2nd Lieutenant Inez A. Leland
818th Medical Aero Evacuation Squadron

It seemed that we spent a few months at Spanhoe, but on June 1, 1944 the 818th was transferred to Cottesmore. That base was a pre-war RAF station, with brick barracks and steam heat - no more coke stoves. It was like a bit of heaven. We almost felt like we were queens living in a place like that

Until D-Day, the only evacuation missions we carried out were to take Air Corps personnel who had suffered psychological breakdowns or combat fatigue from Northern Ireland back to England.

Lieutenant Colonel Robert Gibbons
Group Operations Officer

About two weeks before the actual invasion, three of us were told to go down to Troop Carrier Headquarters at Northolt, myself, HB Lyon, and, McLelland. In there we were told exactly where we were going. From that point on, all three of us were restricted to the base, and it was very tight. Just prior to that I got a call that I was to expect a whole bunch of paint and paint brushes. I was told at that time that we were to put the stripes on the airplane That was very unusual. We had no idea why or what for. It was a result of what had happened in Sicily.

At that point we were told that only one of the key people in the group could lead. Group or the squadrons could not send both the commander and his deputy on the same mission. The deputy group commander, H. B. Lyon and myself, the Group operations officer, had to stay home. This was also because of what happened in Sicily - after the disaster there, many squadrons lost all of their command structure.

Captain Jacob Mancinelli
Navigator, 43rd Troop Carrier Squadron

A group of us, including Colonel McClelland, went

to the HQ for major briefing. This was for everybody, all commands at SHAEF. What discussed was a mission to the coast of France, and gave us a briefing on was they expected, how we were going to assemble, and where the serials would be and then where they would leave England. Where we were going from there was not said.

I do remember one other thing. Someone said that they didn't want a repeat of Sicily. I recall that they said that they would have some kind of identification, *to* make sure that it would not happen again. They stated that we would be flying over our ships and that there would be some method of identification to make sure that nobody would get shot down.

Lieutenant Colonel Henry Hamby
Commander, 310th Troop Carrier Squadron

One morning, gallons and gallons of black and white paint were delivered to my squadron from Group. There was no explanation.

Technical Sergeant Russell Lane
Aviation Mechanic, 310th Troop Carrier Squadron

Many of us were at a movie that night and it was stopped at 7 or 8 **O'** dock. Everybody was called out, regardless of who they were. We were surprised when we learned that we had to paint zebra stripes on our planes. We all expected that D·Day was coming up fast. They had brought in troops of the 82nd Airborne Division several days before. They were all separated from us and there was no contact whatsoever between the two groups.

We painted the planes outside at night so nobody, especially the Germans, would catch us doing it. After we finished the painting we covered the aircraft with camouflage netting. Then D-Day was delayed a day. It was important that anyone didn't see anything of this.

Captain Robert Stubblefield ("Stubby")
Navigator, 309th Troop Carrier Squadron

I didn't communicate with the paratroopers. They were in a stockade. A barbed wire fence surrounded the hanger they were in. They lived in there and stayed in there.

1st Lieutenant Julius H. Petersen
Pilot, 309th Troop Carrier Squadron

The paratroopers couldn't get out of their area, and we were in our section, so we didn't have much to do with them. They couldn't come to the dubs or anything. In fact, their meals were cooked outside in big barrels that they brought with them. They had their own cooks. They were all by themselves.

Captain Bernard Coggins
Navigator, 43rd Troop Carrier Squadron

This situation continued on through the spring months until the later part of May of 1944, when, without any advance notice, the base was sealed. No one could leave the base, no one could make telephone calls off the base. In other words, we couldn't do anything. The battalion of the 82nd Airborne that we were going to drop had moved on the base and was situated down near the airstrips. Combat crews were kept under armed guard and we had military policemen even going with us to the latrines. We knew then that things were coming to a head fast.

We began to get briefings on various parts of the trip and finally, just a day: or two before the actual drop was to be performed, we were given a briefing and the navigators were given maps which showed where the drop was going to be. We found when we extended one of our practice missions over the English coast across the English Channel we had actually flown the D- Day mission on a practice mission. The base was sealed, everything was in readiness, and we got ready for D-Day. We were given briefings on a daily basis. Finally we went in and drew the maps that we were going to use on the actual mission and found out that it was scheduled to depart at 2300, on June 5, 1944.

Lieutenant Colonel Robert Gibbons
Group Operations Officer

I was told ahead of time that Major General Ridgway would be at the briefing. He would trail us into the DZ. One of the things that really startled

Me, and startled everybody, was a message from our Troop Carrier Command Headquarters that if any airplane came back with troops, the pilots would be court-martialed.

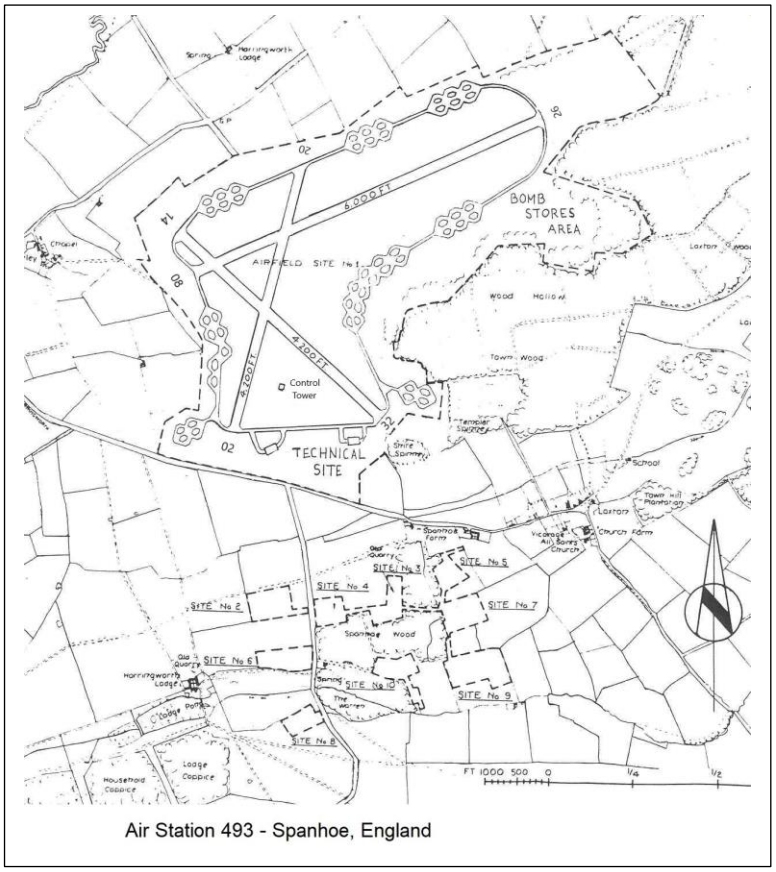
The briefing for the combat crews was as routine as anyone that we would go through when we were on a fairly complicated operation. The big thing was that timing was vital. Of course, as we knew, and I knew from the very beginning, we had to get the paratroopers down all together.

I was completely involved in the briefing, to make sure that they knew exactly what the story was, and had all the details that I had. They were pretty attentive.

Captain Bernard Coggins
Navigator, 43rd Troop Carrier Squadron

As history shows, it was postponed 24 hours because of adverse weather over the English Channel. However, the powers that be knew that if D-Day was delayed very long, there would be no way that we could keep the Germans from knowing what was going to happen. So our Commander-in-Chief General Eisenhower made one of the great decisions in all of history as far as I'm concerned. After a 24 hour delay he said, "Let's go!"

— End of Chapter —



Air Station 493 - Spanhoe, England


(Above) 34th Squadron C-47 at Spanhoe being tended by 315th ground crew. *Photo from https://315group.org*


(Above) Two 315th members waiting outside the WAAF (Women's Army Air Force) at Spanhoe quarters for their "dates" to emerge.

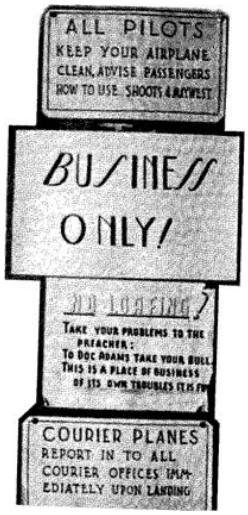

(Left) River Welland Viaduct (railroad bridge near Harrington), two miles northeast of Spanhoe directly off the end of Runway 32, a prominent landmark for 315th aircraft returning from missions.

(Above) 34th Squadron crew at Spanhoe Lto R Glen Davis, Robert 'Doc' Cloer (note squadron patch) and Mervlyn Kruege. *Photo from https://315group.org*

(Above) 310th Squadron "4A" C-47 on Spanhoe flight line. *Photo form https://315group.org*

(Above) 34th Squadron crew on hood of 315th Group jeep – note bumper designations "9th ★(Air Force), 315th Group – ??? HQ" (belongs to Group headquarters). Glider in background. *Photo from https://315group.org*

(Above) Spanhoe Post Exchange



(Above) Signs on the door of 315 TCG Operations. Spanhoe, England. *Photo courtesy of Dave Benfield*

(Above) Two 309th Squadron "UA" crewmembers (unidentified) in front of their C-47 "Mild but Bitter!". *Photo from https://315group.org*