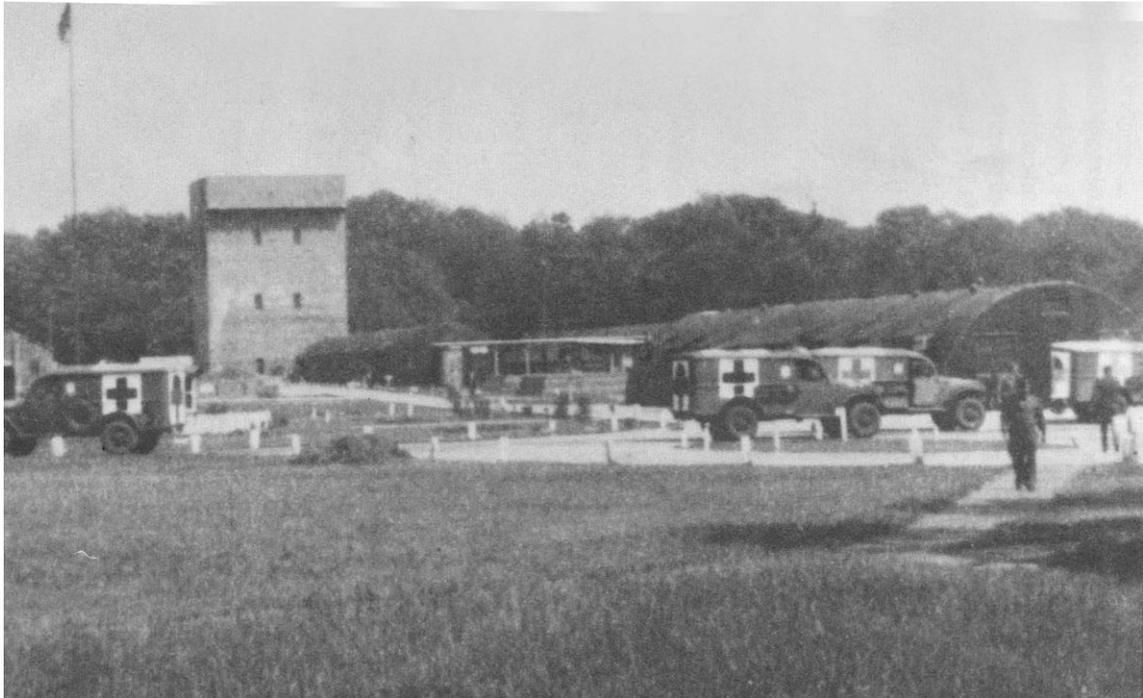


# THE AMERICAN ARMY AIR FORCE HOSPITAL AT WYMONDHAM COLLEGE

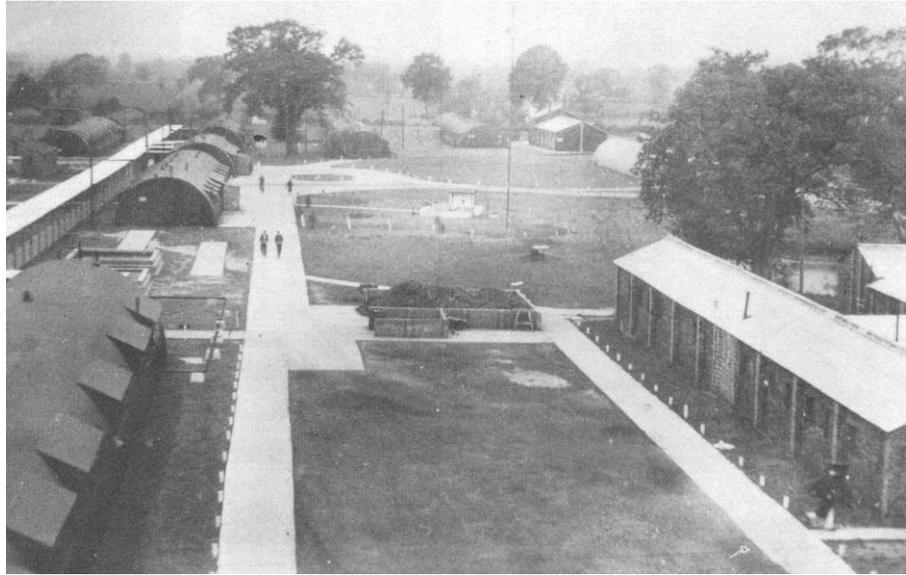


*A general view of the hospital looking east towards the water tower.*

The American Army Air Force Hospital on whose site Wymondham College now stands, was one of a considerable number set up to care for the casualties of that organisation. The hospital at Wymondham served the personnel of fifteen heavy bomber bases, a fighter group and affiliated service organisations such as Engineer, Quarter-master and Ordnance troops, (estimated total; 60,000 troops). Additionally, 2099 patients were evacuated to the hospital by hospital trains in 1944 and 1155 in 1945.

## How it all began.

Between the wars, in the grounds of Morley Hall was the Mid-Norfolk Golf Course. When war came, the Golf Links were first of all taken over for agricultural purposes. Then, an emergency hospital, designed by the Ministry of Works and built under the Lend Lease arrangement, was constructed. On completion the hospital was handed over to the Americans - the 77th



Station Hospital, which provided all medical care at station hospital level for ground and flying personnel of the Eighth Air Force in the vicinity.

Most of the work of the Surgical Service was carried out on casualties from the bomb wings received at high altitude on missions over France, Holland, Norway and Germany. Sixty percent of casualties resulted from flak, fifteen percent from cannon shell fragments and the rest from crashes and accidents. The general age of patients was 18-30 years and almost all admissions were severe. Almost eighty percent of wounds involved upper and lower extremities, fifteen percent the head and a small number the chest and abdomen, "a silent commendation for the armor protective clothing worn by fliers",



*Col. R. B. Warriner,  
Executive Officer of the 231st.  
with some patients and staff  
in the background*

## The 231st. Station Hospital

From March 6th 1944, the 77th became a Reconditioning Centre for Enlisted men and the 231st moved from Redgrave Park, Suffolk to Morley.

The 231st Station Hospital

In the 'Barrack Bag', a history of the unit edited by Bert Outlaw, there is a marvelous story about the arrival of their Commanding Officer at Camp Atterbury, Indiana where they were in training. "In September an old man arrived at Atterbury. Hobbling feebly up to the Headquarters of the 73rd - the lucky, lucky 73rd - he announced himself as Colonel Linwood M. Gable ... "Sergeant, said the old man, "Get me a coke!" He took another look at the outfit. Thoughtfully he added, "and five aspirins!"

Colonel Gabel had served in the First World War and was wounded at the Battle of the Somme. His Executive Officer, Lt Colonel R. B. Warriner had worked in Europe between the wars and in 1936 had been within fifty feet of Hitler, who was alighting from a train. The motto of the hospital was, "The patient comes first". From March 1944 it acted as a receiving hospital for Air Force casualties rushed direct from operational missions over Europe. After the invasion of France, ground forces battle casualties were evacuated there.

### 'D' Day 6th. June and the hospital trains

On May 29th 1944, a telephone call was received stating that within 24 hours the hospital would have to expand from 834 beds to 1254. It was not known where the beds would come from! Within the required period, 1st Lt. Berkowitz had obtained the beds and staff had set them up in ward tents.



*Ward tents erected to cope with mass admissions.*

A feature of the admission procedure was the maximum use of all personnel. Members of a Laundry

Platoon stationed at the hospital as well as convalescent patients were used as stretcher bearers. Though without training, their consideration for the patient's welfare proved to be the most important factor.

Vehicles were borrowed from nearby units to handle the evacuation and Military Police from a Detachment stationed at the hospital acted as road guards on the route. Local people recall ambulances queuing up down Golf Links Road.

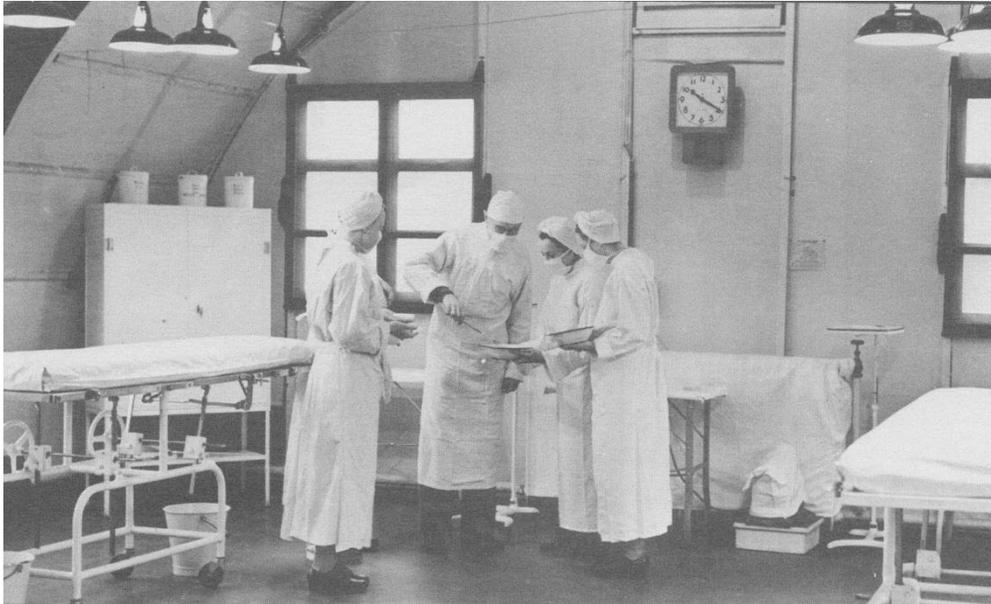
This was in anticipation of the expected casualties from the 'D' Day landings. On July 12th Medical Supply personnel prepared 200 stretchers in two hours ready for the first mass admission of battle casualties from a hospital train at Wymondham Station.

Eight hospital trainloads, 2099 patients, were admitted to the hospital in 1944. Careful plans were made in advance with the hospital Admissions Officer boarding the train at Cambridge and recording any necessary information about each patient before assigning them to a ward.

Lt. Col. Platou ran the Surgical Service where the Orthopaedic section was under great pressure.

Throughout the period preceding, during and after the invasion, thousand bomber raids were common, two or three missions a day being flown. When hospital trains began to bring in Ground

Forces casualties, a third of each trainload was orthopaedic cases. During 1944, the orthopaedic section expanded to 400 patients in seven wards, five tents and a rehabilitation barracks.



*An operating theatre (now sick bay)*

During the first months of 1944, Captain Theodore K. Himmelstein and Tec 3 Richard Pingstock performed all operations and fracture reductions, applied all casts and conducted all clinics at the hospital. As the volume of work increased during invasion time, at one point the small staff had worked for eleven days and nights without an uninterrupted night's sleep. More plaster technicians were trained and two Officers added to the staff.



*A Ward*

## Entertainment

Entertainment played an important part in the maintenance of high morale for both staff and patients.

Visiting artists gave shows. James Cagney sang and danced to the tunes of 'Yankee Doodle Dandy' for which he gained an Academy Award in 1942. Sergeant Joe Louis gave a boxing demonstration and was seen by local people having a drink in 'The Buck'.

Three times a day on three days of the week, movies were shown, on other days feature films could be seen on the wards. Once a week there were G.I. movies and newsreels. There was a world premiere of the film 'Saratoga Trunk' with Ingrid Bergman, when a souvenir programme was produced.



*The Gable Gators*



This picture of the Gable Gators was taken on October 14th 1944 when there was an anniversary party celebrating one year in E.T.O. of the 231st Hospital. The members are left to right:

Sgt. Lovelace, tenor sax., Lt Zeiher trumpet, Cpl Wielgus, trumpet, Cpl Johnson, alto sax., Sgt. Vieira, tenor sax., Cpl. Rocco, drums, Sgt. Kumbera, violin, Cpl. Sauser, violin, Cpl. Aragonna, violin, Sgt. Miller, piano, Cpl. McDowell, vocalist. Other players not in this photograph were M/Sgt Bert Outlaw, alto sax., Richard Ochmanek, accordionist, Leonard Kratoska, accordionist and Sidney Campo, guitar.

The Gable Gators began with a small six piece band and grew into a full size dance band. On arrival in the U.K., the band began playing for dances on and off the post which proved very popular. They broadcast over the British Forces Network and received many letters of commendation.

Richard Martin, a member of Headquarters staff had this to say about the band.

"The band which you mention.....was one of the best known bands of U.S. service-men in all of England. They could have played some where almost every night if the band players could have stood the night life and the daily work of the hospital. They were the pride and joy of Colonel Gable. Some of the violin players were good enough to play with some of the symphony orchestras in our large cities here in the United States. One trumpet player had played with a named band in Chicago prior to entering the service."

When Major Glenn Miller and his E.T.O. Orchestra entertained at a nearby air base, the Gable Gators were invited to play with them. \*\*

On May 7th 1945, when news of the cessation of hostilities first spread in London, the Gable Gators were playing at Rainbow Comer in Piccadilly. The 'Yank' magazine described the scene there as follows:

"Hundreds of G.I's were gathered in the Rainbow Comer Red Cross Club in Piccadilly when bundles of 'Stars and Stripes' were tossed out free. The paper, a V-E Extra bore a huge banner headline: "GERMANY QUIT!"

Rainbow Centre quickly became the focal point of the excitement. A G.I. band which had been playing for a dance at the club moved out on to the balcony and serenaded the mixed Allied crowd milling around on Shaftesbury a venue. Although it was almost impossible to move, jitterbugs and oldsters took the cue and danced as long as there was music."

\*\* *Major Glenn Miller and the Full Band of the Allied Expeditionary Force (AEF) performed at:*

*8<sup>th</sup> Air Force bomber base **Halesworth** E Suffolk afternoon (1,500) **Sunday 6 August 1944***

*8<sup>th</sup> Air Force bomber base **Attlebridge** Norfolk (10,000) 20:30 **Friday 18 August**. Band members are reputed to have gone in to Norwich and played at the **Samson & Hercules Ballroom**.*

*8<sup>th</sup> Air Force bomber base **Wendling** Norfolk (3,000) **Friday 25 August**.*

*8<sup>th</sup> Air Force bomber base **Tibbenham** Norfolk 15:00 – 16:00 (3,000) and then by truck for evening concert at **Thorpe Abbots** near Diss (3,000) staying overnight on **Friday 1 September***



The wedding of Miss Virginia Foley and 1st. Lt. Jack Reynolds.

Left to right: Sgt. Harry Miller, Organist, Col. Pedro Platou, Chief of Surgery, Virginia, Jack, Margaret Fahey A.R.C., Lt. Arthur Potish, Lt. Col. Joseph Karow.

## **The American Red Cross**

The American Red Cross did so much to make life more comfortable and more fun for patients and staff at the hospital. One of the members of the Red Cross Unit at the 231st was Miss Virginia Foley, known as 'Ginger'.

She married Lt. Jack Reynolds, the Personnel Officer in August 1944. It is believed that they were the very first American couple to be married in the European Theatre of Operations.

## **Memories...**

John Rex was a member of the 937th Military Police Company, Detachment 'B', stationed at the hospital. He calls himself "... one of those Yanks who fell in love with Norfolk... I met many wonderful people ... From my experience, I am proud to say that the relationship between the American servicemen and the local people was, as you say in Norfolk, 'top of the shop'.

Mrs. Bernice Pegg (nee Coldham) "The hospital was like a beehive with all the activity! There were murals in the huts painted by the patients. "

Miss Pamela Standley remembers being collected from outside the Church Army Canteen in Town Green, Wymondham to visit the wounded at the hospital.

Derek Daniels remembers a Christmas Party in the Red Cross clubhouse on December 23rd 1944.

"They came and collected us from our homes in ambulances and took us back to the Hospital where we had a great time. We saw a film show and were given toys and sweets galore (for in Morley as elsewhere we were only allowed two ounces a week, we were rationed). But not here! There was candy as the Yanks called it and gum by the yard, the toys were fun - some having been made by the wounded men, while they were convalescing.

## **A patient remembers...**

**William R. Houchins, Roanoke, Virginia**

Bill Houchins was attached to the 452nd B - 17 Bomb Group, 721 Sq, Deopham Green. Ronnie and Maurice Drewery lived near the airfield at Deopham and used to bring fresh bread baked by their mother to his nissen hut. Bill Houchins said, "This was a real treat and boosted our morale because it was like getting food from home". They were able to look round the hospital together on a recent visit.

I was an armorer gunner flying the bombardier position and we were 'togglers'. We toggled out the bombs and had the chin gun turret with twin 50 caliber machine guns. On my 21st mission when I was injured. we were carrying six general purpose 1000 pound bombs. Our target was Zietz, Germany, a synthetic oil refinery. We were flying at 25,000 feet and approaching the target when we were hit with very heavy flak. We had 43 flak holes and an unexpected slug in the wing. We wore flak suits for protection, but I was hit on top of the shoulders where the flak suit was snapped together.

The first pilot, Daniel (Doc) Hannon came down in the nose and gave me first aid trying to stop the bleeding. He also gave me a shot of morphine. I was not in very much pain, but I could not raise my right arm. I gave oxygen check to the crew every three minutes on the way home. As we landed back at Deopham Green, we were met by the ambulance or by the 'meat wagon' as we called them. As they were helping me out of the plane, someone put his hand on my back and it was covered with blood and a black clot. I felt sick for the first time and I heard one of my crew mates, Mack McVey say that he was not flying again. However, he and the crew were flying over Germany in a few days.

The ambulance drove immediately to the 231st Hospital at 1400 hours on March 31st 1945 where the doctors removed the flak, stopped the bleeding and gave me a transfusion and antibiotics. I can still remember the ward with all the broken bodies and bones that were wired up, splinted and in traction. I felt very lucky. At the hospital there was a Dr Friedmond and the following nurses (I have the names on a short snorter): Margaret McCarthy, Florence McCartney, Marie L. Smith.

I received exceptional treatment from everyone at the 231st. I had an excellent recovery and consider myself very lucky. On June 9th, 1945, I was discharged from the 231st and admitted to the 65 General Hospital where I stayed until July 25th 1945. On that day, I left Southampton to return to the USA for rehabilitation. I spent several months in physiotherapy treatment in rehabilitative hospitals. From the time I entered the 231st until recovery was nine months".



*Every American Hospital has a Prisoner of War Camp attached to it. Here the tents of the camp are seen behind the baseball pitch.*

## **After the War**

The hospital closed at midnight on June 8th 1945. After the war it was first of all a transit camp for the Royal Norfolk Regiment and then two Training Colleges. When the Colleges closed, Sir Lincoln Ralphs had the inspired idea of turning the site into a boarding school for Norfolk County Council. In 1991 it became a Grant-Maintained School and an Academy in 2012.

<http://www.wymondhamcollege.org/>

## **Extracts from Major General Kepner's Commendation**

**"Of the professional skill and efficiency displayed by the hospital there can be no doubt...**

**The quality of service rendered by the hospital and the manner in which it was performed has contributed greatly to the morale and effectiveness of this division...**

*Compiled by Anne Hoare from the Hospital Records in the National Archives, Washington and the help of those quoted in the text. The photographs come from the collections of the late Lt. Colonel R.B. Warriner and Master Sgt. Dan Cavanaugh (retired).*

**Please contact the Public Relations secretary at Wymondham College:  
Tel 44 (0)1953 609000 for an appointment to visit.**