

## LANDING AT RAF BASE: RUNWAY SCARES

A TRUE STORY BY FORREST S. CLARK—B-24 CREW MEMBER

*Warning to anyone landing on the wrong runway. It happens. Ever have that feeling?*

We had been on a fairly long mission and I was busy at the radio position sending code. We were lost and we were trying to find the best way back to Shipdham base.

It was getting late. Navigator Lt. Weatherwax looked up the airfield maps and found an RAF base in southern England we could just make. We were out of range of enemy fighters and flak over the North Sea.

I was so preoccupied on the radio that I did not notice the coast coming up as we skirted the beach and left the Channel. Weatherwax tapped me on the shoulder and pointed down. All I saw was a ribbon of coastline. The sky was clear and visibility unlimited.

I tried very hard to send a code message to the RAF base. But the Brit base operator was so fast in sending code I was having trouble deciphering his code message. Weatherwax, the navigator, gave a heading.

We followed a rail line inland from the coast and skimmed above the countryside over church steeples and villages. Finally the pilot spotted the base and started our approach. I always said the Brits sent code too fast for us Americans to read it. Whenever we got an RAF base the code came back in a blur twice as fast as the American base operators.

We eventually set down on the runway and I was watching the landscape go by when someone up front shouted "short runway." We were eating up that runway like a piece of cake. Our big bomber rumbled on and on. Finally just short of the end we pulled up on the brakes and stopped lucky for us.

We piled out and sat down on the tarmac. Griffith came over took his flight helmet off and heaved a sigh of relief. Just then a weapons carrier full of British girls pulled up and they started to swarm over our B-24. Someone, I forget who now, said, "I hope those women aren't going to work on our bomber." Sure enough they were.

We jumped into a jeep and took off for the base mess hall and pub. Turned out we had missed the main runway that was big enough for our B-24 and had landed at a shorter auxiliary runway. After all the Brits were flying Lancs out of there on long runways. Our mistake.

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I remember this incident just about the way it happened but maybe I forgot the RAF base. It might have been Fords or something like that, maybe close. It was one of the one or two times we had to pick another base to land, the other one was up north near Cromer.

But that is another story.

It also is doubtful the RAF base control tower did not direct our bomber to the longest runway. This message probably was never received and therefore the pilot was unaware he was landing on a shorter runway.

It was customary for 4-engine bombers to use maximum runway space for both take offs and landings.

Many airfield maps had indicated where the runways were and the length of them. The RAF operator may have sent the information but I failed to read it because of the rapid rate of code. While over friendly territory it was not necessary to encode every message so we could have communicated without code.

By the way, we chose an RAF base because of the NCO pubs on their bases. While the RAF crews chose the American bases for the mess hall food.

The reason I remember the incident is because I had difficulty reading the RAF code messages. After that I decided to get faster on the code.

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Once more we had made it to the great mother earth from the perilous skies and beaten the odds against us, and death waiting for us to live another day.

Our pilot on this mission and many others, Major Rockford C. Griffith died in September 2005 near Fort Worth, Texas. He will be remembered in the 44th. I dedicate this story In Memoriam to him. He deserves it.

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\* For years later I tried to do research to find this RAF base and the best I could discover was that it might have been Fords. My co-pilot Lt. Tinsman thinks so also but we are not sure. If anyone has an RAF base chart it may show the location. I know it was inland from the coast. Tinsman is still living but I have not heard from Weatherwax in years. Griffith died in 2005. That leaves Tinsman as the sole surviving source.

I would like to hear from anybody who can identify it.

Perhaps other 44th planes landed at RAF bases. It would be interesting to know where. Anyone know?

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When I think in reveries of the Second World War it is mostly of those take offs in early dawn when we could see from our bomber as we lifted off the soft mist shrouded outlines of

English countrysides. Small villages in the mist, winding roads and church spires and lots of woodlands and hedgerows.

I thought with a sharp pain would I ever see them again. Would I return from the mission?

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By Forrest S. Clark, 44th Bomb Group, 8th Air Force, WWII, 1943-1945.

He did survive those take offs and landings.

The crew could have crashed on the short runway and that would have been ironic after surviving enemy flak and fighters. But that is the way fate works.

The life you lose may be your own. Check the runway before you land and be sure it is the right one for your aircraft. Happy landing.

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A jet took off on the wrong runway in 2006 and 49 people died in the crash. It does happen even today and it can be you if you are not careful.