

‘Wild Bill’ Crump, the manuscript, an introduction.

I first met Bill on page 132 of Jeffery Ethell’s and Robert Sand’s book ‘Fighter Command’. There amongst a series of wonderful Kodachrome colour images taken by Herb Rutland was one of ‘Wild Bill’ Crump sitting high in his brightly coloured P-51 Mustang aircraft.

From my early years I had always been interested in military history and aviation, from the aviation aspect almost exclusively centred on the RAF. However meeting my future wife (a Glaswegian but then living with her family in Essex) subsequently resulted in not only our marriage but also weekend visits to the in-laws, where on quiet Sundays, I took the opportunity to wander and visit the many small aviation museums in Essex and Suffolk where I was introduced to the Mighty Eighth.

Fired by the stories of the Mighty Eighth as I peered through the glass display cases in these museums, I set out to find out more. I of course purchased the standard reference books for anyone with an interest in the Eighth, Roger Freeman’s trilogy of books ‘The Mighty Eighth’, the ‘Diary’ and the ‘War Manual’ the first of many which would include ‘Fighter Command’.

Chancing on the photo of Bill, I was intrigued. I had in all my reading never come across a pilot with the name of Crump before let alone a full-blown fighter pilot (subsequent and ongoing research has identified a number of Crump pilots and aircrew including two further 8th AF fighter pilots named Crump, a 15th AF Mustang pilot, a Luftwaffe ‘experten’ plus an RAF and RNZAF fighter pilot in each service and other possibilities). I needed to know more and set out to make contact with Bill if possible.

Back around the late 1990’s electronic mail was relatively new to me, however through this medium I was subsequently able to make contact with Ed Marlow, the 356th Fighter Group representative, who kindly put me in contact with Bill. My initial letter was met with wonderful enthusiasm and Bill’s return letter contained several photos of him along with a letter briefly outlining his flying career and the amazing story of how he adopted a Coyote that he named Jeep, who subsequently flew five combat missions with him from England with the 360th Fighter Squadron, part of the 356th Fighter Group known both as the ‘Martlesham Playboys’ and the 8th Air Force’s ‘Hard Luck Outfit’. This was the beginning of a friendship maintained through numerous letters and phone calls.

It was during these transatlantic conversations that Bill mentioned his wish to have his story recorded and if possible published. It was obvious Bill was looking for a volunteer and I rather rashly volunteered for the role, though at the time I had no experience of writing. It was only after I put the phone down that it dawned on me the enormity of my undertaking.

So began a stream of question and answer letters that formed the backbone of our subsequent manuscript. I was also soon immersed in the many 8th AF related books I purchased as I attempted to broaden my knowledge of the Eighth’s endeavours. Searches of the web through up further sources of information and I soon became familiar with combat reports, missing aircrew reports, accident reports and others as I set out through the various agencies to obtain copies of them.

Shortly after our correspondence had begun Bill had put me in contact with Ray Burwell his great friend, who had gone through not only training with him but subsequent posting to England and combat with the 356th Fighter Group. Ray was in ill health, but despite this, sent me several

wonderful and informative letters in response to my questions on their time in England and provided additional information on Richard Andrino the third member of the group of friends that would train, fly and fight together. Doreen Burwell and Sharon Justin, Ray's wife and daughter respectively were also enthusiastic supporters of the manuscript and amongst other information provided access to Ray's log book and details of his post war career.

Despite the information that both Bill and Ray provided, there were still gaps in my knowledge, it had also become apparent to me that I could not tell Bill and Ray's story (and that of Richard Andrino) without that of their Squadron as they were so intertwined. In discussion with Bill, it was decided to expand the scope of the manuscript using the story of Bill's flying career and friendship with Ray and Richard as the thread that would weave itself through the manuscript linking all the sections and chapters together.

Bill provided me with a copy of the 356th Fighter Group Association's contact sheet for his squadron and made a number of introductions on my behalf. Subsequently all members, both pilots and ground crew were contacted. Unfortunately in some instances it was too late, time had taken its inevitable toll. However my enquiries were met with great kindness and enthusiasm, be it by the veteran or his family. All my requests for information were answered and I would like to record my great appreciation of this help provided by Paul Haby (Armourer), Wayne Gatlin, Bob Barnhart, Preston Easley, Jack Pidwell, Frank Russell, Bill Rutland son of Herb Rutland, Alden Thomas and his daughter Diane Runkel, Jack Scudder, Marvin and Dorothy Berger (Armourer), Jim Hickey, Bob Schmidt and Ed Nebinger.

The subsequent document/manuscript, now approaching some 400 sides of A4, records not only Bill's flying career, Jeep's story, his friendship with Ray and Richard but also that of his Squadron the 360th Fighter Squadron from mid 1944 when he joined them until the end of the war.

An undertaking like this cannot be successfully achieved without the assistance of a great many people. I would also like to record my thanks to the following people. Peter Randall for the immense amount of information on the 360th's aircraft that I was able to access via his website www.littlefriends.co.uk the little information that I was able to provide in return as a result of my research never deterring Peter's willingness to offer assistance and advice. Peter introduced me to Nick King the wonderfully talented artist whose paintings of aircraft brilliantly illustrate Peter's website. Nick subsequently painted a profile of Bill's aircraft for him and also of virtually all of the other pilots that responded to me. These profiles now appear on Peter's web site and Nick has kindly agreed to them being reproduced in any subsequent publication that results from this manuscript.

David Wade the aviation archaeologist, who has excavated virtually every 356th Fighter Group crash site in the UK (and who has plans for those on the Continent too), who provided information and access to his extensive collection of photographs.

Huie Lamb for recalling the events of his ditching in the North Sea, to Dick Hewitt his wing man for being able to make extensive use on information on this ditching in his book 'Target of Opportunity'.

Don Caldwell for similarly being able to make extensive use of the information contained in his books 'The JG 26 War Diary' and 'JG 26 Hitler's Top Guns' to record the events of the Luftwaffe's actions on the 1st January 1945.

Paul Chryst for access to his diary recording his stay at the flak farm at Furzdown House.

As I was aware that Bill's story could not be told without that of his Squadron it soon became apparent that simple statements such as "a bomber was seen to go down" recorded in the Squadron diary, had to be further investigated to give a more complete picture of the events that unfolded on a mission. I think this decision was vindicated when one of the 360th's former pilots said "until I read your manuscript I did not know so much was going on during our missions". Assisting me in my efforts, I would like to thank Smudger Smith and Margaret Griffiths of 218 Gold Coast Squadron RAF Association and Lee Ann Bradley 398th Bomb Group historian amongst others.

There are numerous other people who have assisted who I am unable to record here individually, but my thanks go to them all. In particular I should mention Sylvia Font for assisting this 'dinosaur' with his word processing at the start of this endeavour, Terry Chalk my work colleague now sadly passed away, for his constant encouragement, Kate Pattison for proof reading the entire document and most of all Alison my wife for enduring the many nights and weekends over the numerous years the manuscript has taken to compile, with me deep in research and sat in front of the PC.

The great regret of this endeavour is that Bill and I never got to meet. There were a couple of occasions when we planned to meet co-inciding with the bi-annual 356th Fighter Group Association reunion in the States, however on each occasion health problems prevented it.

Unfortunately Bill never took to e-mail and so we relied largely on 'Snail Mail'. That and my work and other commitments meant that it took a number of years before the manuscript was largely complete. This, we were advised, had largely co-incided with a down turn in commercial interest in 8th Air Force books and despite our efforts we were unable to attract a publisher. In my last telephone conversation with Bill, he made me promise not to give up trying. I thought it strange at the time that he made such a point of asking. His booming voice gave such a sense of strength and permanence that I never thought that Bill would not be there at the end of the phone line gently encouraging me along. It came as a great shock when June, Bill's wife contacted me to say Bill had passed away.

I am extremely grateful for the continuing support of Bill's family and it is the hope of both his son Bob Crump and myself that the linking of excerpts of the manuscript to the web site that he set up to honour his father may attract a publisher, but will at least allow Wild Bill's story and that of the 360th Fighter Squadron to be brought to the attention and recognition of the wider public that they so richly deserve.

Shaun Crump 2009.