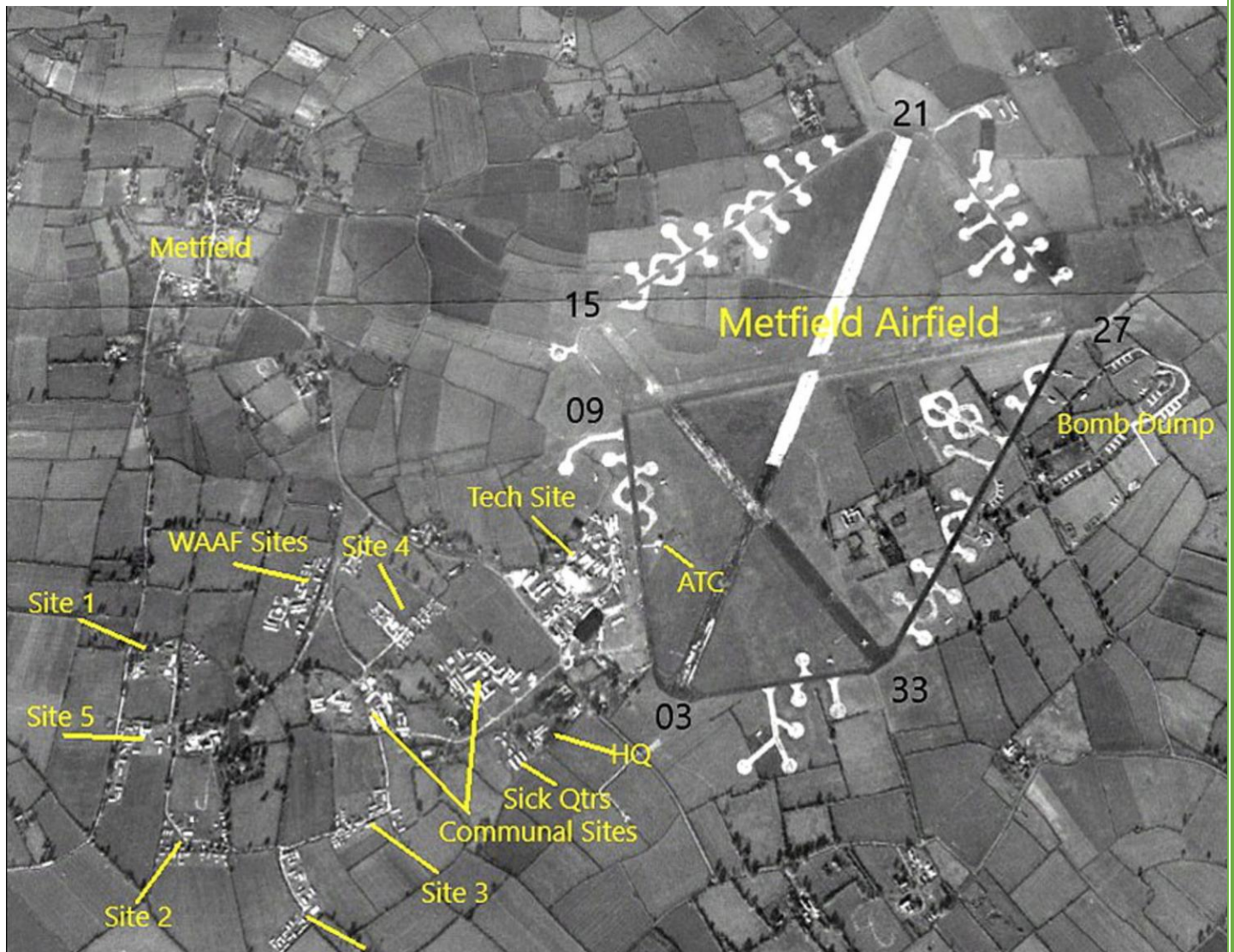
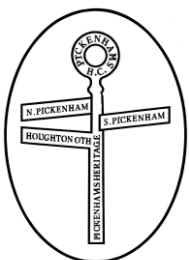


“What’s RDX?”



THE DEFINITIVE STORY OF THE METFIELD BOMB DUMP EXPLOSION.



*Researched and compiled by
Riccard J Parsonson MA*

£2.50



Riccard J. Parsonson MA has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the Author of this work

Every effort has been made to trace and acknowledge the copyright of images and quotes used in this publication. If I have omitted anyone, it is not intentional, and I sincerely apologise. Responsibility for any errors of fact or interpretations is, of course, entirely mine.

***Riccard J. Parsonson MA.
North Pickenham
2026***

All rights reserved. No part of this monograph may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical including photocopying, recording or by any information or storage and retrieval system, without permission from the copyright owners and publishers in writing.

About 16:15 hours on Saturday 15th July 1944, the afternoon of the explosion, a resupply convoy of seven loaded trucks arrived at the bomb dump at Metfield. The load of six vehicles were bombs, mainly 500 pounders. The seventh truck carried fuses and bomb fins.

*(The 2218th Quartermaster Truck Company (Aviation) unit diary refers to **six** drivers killed in the explosion at Metfield, and the American Battle Monuments Commission concurs these facts. The unit was stationed at based at the Earsham ordnance depot (Station 545) in Norfolk, England, at the time. Other accounts mention only mention **five** trucks).*



A burnt-out general purpose 6x6 two-and-a-half-ton truck following the explosion (Authors Collection).

All of the bomb dump crew had gone to supper which involved a long ride around the perimeter track. There was no one available to unload the convoys bombs. The Sergeant in charge told the drivers to wait with their vehicles until the bomb dump crews came back from supper and the bombs could then be unloaded correctly with a hoist. According to the driver of the truck loaded with the fins and fuses, who survived the explosion, the other drivers were impatient to get back to their base for a big Saturday night liberty on the town. They decided to roll the bombs out of the tailgate and go.



An example of a truck mounted bomb hoist along with 500lb bombs. (c 491BG Association)

In this procedure the long axis of the bomb was aligned across the truck bed and parallel to the axels. The tailgate was dropped, the driver shifted into reverse and accelerated aggressively to achieve a speed of approximately 25 MPH. When reaching this speed, the driver would hit the brakes hard causing an abrupt stop. The momentum imparted to the bombs by this movement would cause it to roll out the back of the truck when it suddenly braked.

In this case, one bomb fell on another that had already rolled out and the detonation which resulted spread to other bombs nearby and finally involved the whole dump, and set off or made unusable an estimated 700 tons of bombs out of the 1,200 tons stored there.

On the night before the explosion, there had been a planned mission and the aircraft had been loaded the with bomb loads that included incendiary bombs. It was common practice for the last formation aircraft to carry incendiaries.

The mission had been delayed for several hours and finally scrubbed about noon on the 15th because of bad weather in the target area. These bombs had then been offloaded and hauled back to the bomb dump where they were still on dollies awaiting the mission instructions for the following day.

The force of the explosion blew these incendiary bombs around and throughout the bomb dump, some of them ignited and it is believed thus started other fires.



The mushroom cloud of the Metfield bomb dump explosion (491st BG Association)

Whilst the six drivers (*Identified*) who decided to roll their bombs out, the driver (*Unidentified*) of the seventh truck which carried the fuses and fins, moved off some distance to the area where those items were stored. He dismounted his vehicle and sat on the running board so the truck was physically between him and the bomb unloading area. He recalled hearing the trucks rev up their engines, brakes screeching, and bombs falling out, then heard the massive explosion. He dove his truck into a deep drainage ditch for shelter and then followed the ditch out and away from the dump. He was the only survivor of the delivery party.



The aftermath of the trucks following the bomb dump explosion. (c Authors Collection)

The explosion was heard over 40 miles away and shattered windows in villages several miles from the dump. It caused a crater approximately 25 feet deep by 75 feet in diameter. The differential axle of one truck was blown into a village over a mile away. The East T2 hanger doors were blown off their runners and the walls were blown out. Many other buildings on the airfield were badly damaged.



Metfield east hanger half a mile from the bomb dump. (c 491st BG Association)



Part of the bomb crater at Metfield. (c 491st BG Association)



Ears of corn growing in nearby fields had their heads and stalks completely removed by the blast. (c 491st BG Association)



42-50542

Six B-24s were wrecked and six others badly damaged, on most, the aft fuselage section between the trailing edge of the wing and the rudders was twisted as much as 15 to 20 degrees. Also, the wings were warped. Pressure sensitive instruments such as altimeters and manifold pressure gauges were almost all ruined in the 54 or more aircraft on the base. It was recognised the following aircraft were so badly damaged that they were immediately salvaged. 42-50361, 42-50363 "Section 8", 42-50440, 42-50542, 44-40084 "Little Joe", 44-40141, "Ponderous Pachyderm" (c 491st BG Association)



42-50363 (c 491st BG Association)

RDX

The investigation disclosed one exceptionally interesting fact regarding the explosion. According to the ordnance department, the bombs that were being delivered were filled with an explosive designated RDX (Royal Demolition Explosive). In this mode TNT (Trinitrotoluene) explosive was mixed with beeswax. This compound gave each bomb about 50% more explosive power, i.e. a normal 500 lb. TNT bomb would have the equivalent of a 750 lb. TNT bomb.

The Yellow Stripe

It was also known by ordnance that the RDX compound was much less stable than normal high explosive compounds, that is, it is more likely to explode due to rough handling or inadvertent dropping. The RDX bombs therefore were required to be identified by a yellow strip around the girth where the lugs were welded to the case. This was intended to be a warning to bomb handlers. It was later ascertained by ordnance that the bombs delivered to Metfield on 15th July 1944 were not marked with a yellow band."



The bombs with the yellow ring (c Authors Collection)

Eyewitness Accounts.
(That may differ from the facts)

Major General Frederic H. Miller USAF.

The July afternoon was sunny and windless a rare day in the U.K. Just after 16:30 hours, I was midway between my quarters and the mess hall, looking for supper, when a tremendous explosion shattered the quiet. The thought of a V-2 attack crossed my mind as I shifted into double time towards the operations block on the flight line, about 100 yards away

I ran to the balcony where I saw a huge column of smoke billowing up across the airdrome. At its base bursts of red sheets of flame blossomed continuously; debris could be seen in the air. The Operations watch reported the bomb dump had exploded and was on fire.

Fighting the fire, which was out of control. would have needlessly exposed the firefighters. Thus, security was instructed to seal off the area with road blocks and patrols to prevent penetration. The 95th Combat Wing and 2nd Air Division were informed of events. We were given a one-day stand down from operations, later extended to three days. British civilian authority was informed. Then we Just waited for the fire to burn itself out.

By Sunday (16th July 1944), morning the fires had largely subsided to soldering, smoky residue. Off limits was maintained until a team from 8th AF headquarters could arrive to inspect and investigate the explosion. A new bomb dump would have to be created and restocked before operations could resume.

Damage assessment showed that 23 to 24 aircraft would be unfit to ever fly again. On most, the aft fuselage section between the trailing edge of the wing and the rudders was twisted as much as 15 to 20 degrees. Also, the wings were warped.

Pressure sensitive instruments such as altimeters and manifold pressure gauges were almost all ruined in the 54 or more aircraft on the base. Much of this damage was not detected until missions to altitude were resumed.

The wheels which guided hangar doors had come off their tracks and the doors knocked about by the force of the explosion.

It was reported that windows were blown out in a village several miles away. Five bomb delivery truck drivers and their trucks were missing. Only fragments of the vehicles or men were found.

A crater estimated at 25 ft. deep by 75 ft. diameter was holed in the bomb dump where dollies, bombs, cranes and other equipment was Jumbled together like Jack straws. An estimated 700tons of bombs were destroyed or made unusable for operations.

Metfield became the focus of attention by much of the rank in the 8th Air Force. We were visited by Lt. General Doolittle, 8th AF Commander who flew up in a polished B-26. The 2nd Air Division Commander, Major General Kepner and, as I recall, Colonels and other ranks were endless. Lt. Col. Jack Merrill and I were kept busy for days with sightseers.

The official investigation produced a narrative which runs like this:

About 16: 15 hours on the afternoon of the explosion a bomb delivery party of 6 loaded trucks arrived at the bomb dump. The loads of five vehicles were bombs. mainly or perhaps all, 500 pounders. The other truck carried fuses and bomb fins.

All of the bomb dump crew had gone to supper which involved a long ride around the perimeter road. There was no one to unload the bombs. The Sgt. in charge told the drivers to wait until the men came back from supper and the bombs could then be unloaded properly with a hoist. According to the driver of the truck with fins and fuses, who survived the explosion, the other drivers were impatient to get back to their base for a big Saturday night on the town. They decided to roll the bombs over the tailgate and be gone.

In this procedure the long axis of the bomb was aligned across the truck bed and parallel to the axles. The tailgate was dropped, the driver shifted into reverse and gunned his engine to achieve speed. When moving fast enough the driver would hit the brakes hard causing a sharp stop. The momentum imparted to the bomb by fast backing would cause it to roll out the back of the truck when the truck stopped sharply.

In this case, one bomb fell on another already rolled out and the detonation which resulted spread to other bombs nearby and finally involved the whole dump.

On the night before the explosion, we had laid on a mission and had loaded the aircraft with a bomb load that included incendiary bombs. It was common practice for the last formation box or two of a group to carry incendiaries.

The mission had been delayed for several hours and finally scrubbed about noon of the 15th because of bad weather in the target area. These bombs had then been offloaded and hauled back to the bomb dump where they were still on dollies (transporters) awaiting the microinstructions for an operation next day.

The force of the explosion tossed the Incendiary Bombs around Helter skelter throughout the bomb dump, some of them ignited and thus started other fires we believe.

When the five drivers decided to roll their bombs out. the driver of the sixth truck which carried fuses and fins, moved off to a separate area where those items were stored. He dismounted his vehicle and sat on the running board so the truck was between him and the bomb unloading area. He recalled hearing the trucks rev up their engines, brakes screeching, and bombs falling out - then the explosion.

He dove into a deep drainage ditch for shelter and then followed the ditch out and away from the dump. He was the only survivor of the delivery party.

The investigation disclosed one exceptionally interesting angle about the explosion. According to the ordnance people, the bombs being delivered were filled with an explosive designated RDX. In this mode the ordinarily used explosive was mixed with beeswax. This compound gave each bomb about 50% more explosive power, i.e., a 500lb. bomb became the equivalent of a 750 lb. bomb.

It was also known by ordnance that the RDX (Royal Demolition Explosive) compound was much less stable than normal HE, that is more likely to explode due to rough handling or inadvertent dropping. The RDX bombs therefore were required to be identified by a yellow strip around the girth where the lugs were welded to the case. This was intended to be a warning to bomb handlers. It was later ascertained by ordnance that the bombs delivered to Metfield on 15th July 1944 were not marked with a yellow band.

I Remember the Bomb Dump Explosion.

By Warren E. Doremus, Tail Gunner, Bill Martin Crew R1 & R177.

On July 15, 1944 we had just landed 20 minutes before when walking towards the mess hall, there was a loud explosion. Looking back at the field, you could see a small black mushroom cloud. A Jeep was just pulling up and began to turn and head for the explosion area along with another gunner and myself. We were stopped by MP's and told we could go no further. We got out of the Jeep to watch for a while when suddenly there was a tremendous explosion. Red, yellow, and orange flames inside a grey-black smoke that shot up at least 2,000 feet. Metal was flying through the air and the giant doors of a hangar were torn off. We all hit the ground fast and just in time for the concussion wave that rolled over us. When it was all over, we realized how lucky we were. Just 20 minutes earlier we were flying over the bomb dump.

I'll Never Forget The 491st Bomb Dump.

by George M. Gotschall, 8th Air Force Composite Command.

I shall never forget the 491st. Why? Their bomb dump blew up. Bomb disposal personnel were immediately called to the scene. An 8th Air Force Major Rogers and myself were in charge. We used all available ammunition personnel from the base, plus a group from Ireland, as well as our two Sergeants *Richard Thomas Riordan (ASN 31271721)* and (*First Names and ASN Unknown*) Farley.

We surveyed the mess and it was just that. We arranged for billets and four meals a day with the Quartermaster. Working hours were from 6 AM to 10.00 PM. The first job was to pick up all the loose pieces of bombs and chunks of explosives. There was one crater which would have held a two-story house. We used this as a receptacle to hold all the stuff that could be handled safely. The next phase was to gingerly dig out the bombs that were partially buried. The big ones were no problem since none of them were fused. The little 20 lb. frags (*Fragmentation Bombs*) were the most treacherous since they were fused. If the arming blocks were out, a light touch on the fuse would set it off. We used a bulldozer to carefully shove the dirt back into the craters while we watched for more bombs. The dozer blade made a nice armour plate. After the crew had almost completed the clean-up, we disposed of the excess explosives by burning them in the big crater and then filling it with the bulldozer.

While we were putting on the finishing touches, another crisis developed. I noticed a number of soldiers running at full tilt towards the headquarters. I stopped one of them to find out what was wrong. He yelled, "The Chemical Dump is on fire." Then he took off like a rabbit. I dropped behind a bunker and took a quick look. There was a curl of heavy black smoke. Then I saw two soldiers trotting towards the fire. It was Sergeants Riordan and Farley. When I arrived on the scene Riordan was using an ammunition box as a shield, was busily shovelling dirt on a large incendiary which was on fire. Farley was lying on top of a pile of incendiaries beating

out a fire with his hat. The fire was in the tarp covering the bombs. I recognized the type of bomb that Riordan was trying to get out and ordered him back. As I suspected, the bomb blew, scattering over a larger area and making many small fires. These were easy to bury. Fortunately, we were able to contain them without further damage. A day later the field was cleared for operations.

Sergeants Riordan and Farley were awarded the Soldier's Medal for their heroic action. The full crew received a letter of commendation from General Doolittle.

We Cycled to the Explosion.

From Mario Montresor, Radio Operator, Davis Crew 62.

Hearing the noise of the bomb dump explosion, we left our quarters on our bikes for the source. As we neared the Hangars and saw the huge hangar doors off their tracks and laying on the ground, we did a fast 180 degree turn and went back to our quarters for safety.

QUARTERMASTERS TRUCK COMPANY (AVIATION), SERVICEMEN KILLED

The explosion was of such a prolific force that identification of only one of those killed, **HUFF** was able to be positively identified. The remaining five servicemen are listed as missing. The following are the details of those killed in the incident.

DONALD P. ADKINS, PVT, 35350614. Attached to the 2218th Quartermasters Truck Company (Aviation). Adkins was born on 20/1/1918 in Indiana, to Charles E and Pearl M Adkins. He resided in Grant, Kentucky. He enlisted on 2/4/1942. His civil occupation was semiskilled, chauffeur and driver, bus, taxi, truck, and tractor. He was single without dependants. He is commended on the wall of the missing at Cambridge American Cemetery and Memorial Coton, South Cambridgeshire District, Cambridgeshire, England.
<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/56287285/donald-perry-adkins>

MARVIN EDWARD HUFF, PVT, 37414150. Attached to the 2218th Quartermasters Truck Company (Aviation). Huff was born on 15/12/1922 in Washington County, Missouri, to Jud Ervin (b.1900) and Myrtle S Patton (b.1898) Huff. He enlisted on 26/1/1943. His civilian occupation was, semiskilled mechanic and repairman, motor vehicles. He was single without dependants. He is buried at Huntsville Cemetery, Huntsville, Logan County, Ohio, USA.
<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/5273698/marvin-edward-huff>

DONALD LEROY HURLEY "Don" PFC, 35619775. Attached to 2218th Quartermasters Truck Company (Aviation). Hurley was born on 10/7/1919 in Bellefontaine, Logan County, Ohio, USA, to Raymond Ainsely (b.1894) and Frances Nevada Slane (b.1896). Hurley. He enlisted on 23/12/1942. He was employed in the New York City, Railroad shops, and was employed as a machinist helper prior to his induction into military service.. He received his training in the U. S. Air Force at Miami Beach, Florida. Chanute Field, Illinois, Scott Field, Illinois and Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. before being sent overseas in April 1944. He was married to Agnes Lorella Vance (B 1896) on 23/3/1940 in Bellefontaine, Ohio.
https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/56290911/donald-le_roy-hurley



Donald Leroy Hurley and his wife Agnes. (c Find-A-Grave)

According to word received by his wife, the former Agnes Vance, 800 West Williams Avenue. A letter signed by **Adjutant General, James Alexander Ulio**, of the War Department, informed Mrs. Hurley as follows:

"It is with deepest regret that I confirm the telegram of recent date informing you of the death of your husband, Private First-Class Donald L. Hurley, of the Quartermaster Corps. The official casualty reports say that your husband died on the 15th of July, 1944, at Harleston, England, as a result of a bombing explosion.

"I know that added distress is caused by failure to receive more information and detail. Unfortunately, initial reports are necessarily brief, due to conditions under which they are prepared. They are limited by facilities available for their transmission and the fact that all of the details are not known at the time the initial report is rendered. However, at the earliest practicable date, the Commanding Officer will furnish the War Department with supplemental reports and when this is received, additional information will be transmitted to you immediately.

"I sincerely regret that this message must carry so much sorrow in your home. My deepest sympathy is extended to you in your bereavement."

Letter Received by his Wife.

On 14/7/1944, Private Hurley wrote a letter to his wife and she received it a short time after the telegram was delivered. The letter indicated that Private Hurley then was in the best of health. There had been no word of any wounds and the cause of his death is unknown.

He has two brothers in the armed service, Private First-Class Edwin Hurley, who is stationed in Cleveland, and Robert Hurley, who is serving with the Coast Guard in Maryland. Two sisters, Mrs. Ivan Quay, of Belle Centre, and Mrs. Max Green, R. F. D. 4, Bellefontaine, remain.

EARL N. Mc CLURE, PVT, 15337080 Attached to 2218th Quartermasters Truck Company (Aviation). Mc Clure was born in 4/3/1922 in Torchlight, Kentucky, to Edgar Enslow (b.1878) and Sallie Effie Rickman (b.1889) Mc Clure. He resided at Cabell, West Virginia, USA. He enlisted on 18/10/1942. His civilian occupation is currently unknown. He was single without dependants. He is commended on the wall of the missing at Cambridge American Cemetery and Memorial Coton, South Cambridgeshire District, Cambridgeshire, England.
<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/56292235/earl-n-mcclure>



Earl N. Mc Clure (c 491st Association)

LEBI NASH, PVT, 36461118, Attached to 1578th Quartermasters Truck Battalion (Aviation), part of the 2217th Quartermaster Truck Company. Nash was born in 1909 in Michigan, USA. He resided in Chippewa, Michigan, USA. He enlisted on 8/4/1943. His civil occupation, was unskilled lumberman, raftsmen, and woodchopper. He was married to Emily Julian Nash. He is commended on the wall of the missing at Cambridge American Cemetery and Memorial Coton, South Cambridgeshire District, Cambridgeshire, England.
<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/56292823/lebi-nash>

STEVE W. SUCHEY PVT, 34197931, Attached to 2218th Quartermasters Truck Company (Aviation). Suchey was born 1/5/1910 in Alabama. He resided at Jefferson, Missouri, USA. He enlisted on 7/2/1942, to John J (b.1878) and Mary Josephine Cutter (b.1881) Suchey. His civil occupation was semiskilled miner, and mining-machine operator. He was single, without dependents. He is commended on the wall of the missing at Cambridge American Cemetery and Memorial Coton, South Cambridgeshire District, Cambridgeshire, England.
<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/56294755/steve-w-suchey>



Steve W. Suchey (*c Find-A-Grave*)

Museum Exhibit

In 1970, historian Roger Freeman was given this twisted bomb casing by the resident farmer, while visiting Metfield. Embedded within is the sole of a boot believed to be from one of those killed in the explosion. This is on display at the Air Force Museum in Dayton, Ohio. No doubt the shoe belonged to one of the unfortunate ordinance men who impatiently unloaded their 500 lb bombs off the end of his truck that day.

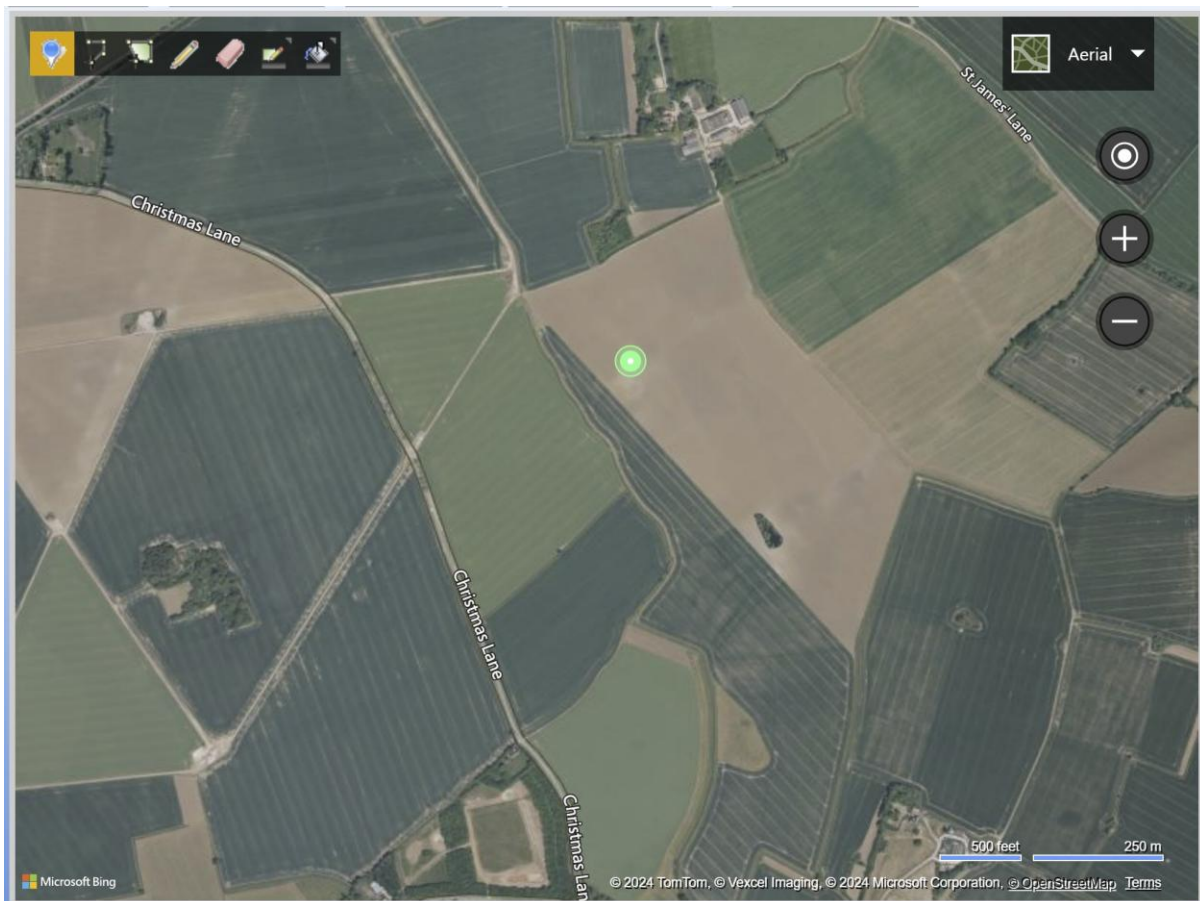


Museum Exhibit-Bomb casing and sole of boot. (c Air Force Museum in Dayton, Ohio)

The bomb dump explosion also caused day to day procedural problems and another base had to be found for the 491st BG. It was decided that they would up sticks and move and on Tuesday, 15th August 1944 the 491st moved lock, stock and barrel to North Pickenham.

Following the conflict Metfield was returned to agricultural use; however, the site of the bomb dump explosion could be seen for many years as a water-filled lake. When the lake was cleared out, all types of discarded equipment was found, including several unexploded bombs. Indeed, ordnance that was tossed into the air during the bomb dump explosion has been found over the years in the fields surrounding Metfield. Pieces of metal from the exploded bombs has been found scattered over the area to the present day.

In the late 1960s, the main runways, taxiways and parking aprons were mostly torn up or turned into single lane agricultural roads. Very little evidence of the airfield can be seen today only a few brick buildings, deteriorating Quonset (Nissen) huts, and some concrete roadways that were aircraft taxiways.



The location of Metfield Bomb Dump Crater can still be seen today as a lighter colour on the Google Earth Image. (c Google)