



American veterans who survived the wartime raid on Kassel back on the runway at Tibenham.

Survivors of ill-fated raid

STEADY drizzle and the cloud base at little more than 500 feet meant that the small group of wartime US Air Force veterans found themselves grounded.

An aerial view of Tibenham on Saturday would have been probably the last for this group of ageing heroes, men in their seventies returning to commemorate a special day in their lives.

Survivors of the costly

Kassel mission over Germany, they were back at their old base to mark its 50th anniversary and to talk about the old days.

They were able to pore over albums and cuttings and debate what went wrong on that fateful day in September, 1944.

Thirty-five B24 Liberator bombers flew from the Norfolk base with an enemy aircraft works as their target. Unhappily it was to prove one of the costliest missions of the war.

They lost direction, got separated from a fighter escort and found themselves a target for 150 German fighter

planes.

In just a few minutes 25 of the American planes were shot down, others crashed in France, two more made it to Kent and one crash-landed at Tibenham. Just four returned safely. *slb 320*

Of the 370 men who set out about 60 got back to base.

Seventy-one-year-old Larry Bowers from Atlanta, Georgia, was an assistant engine gunner on his 19th mission from Tibenham.

He remembered how the sky dramatically lit up as the German fighters struck with 30mm and 20mm cannon.

"Of my crew the radio operator's leg was blown off

and the top turret gunner was hit in the head," he said.

Larry was hit in the leg but managed to parachute to safety, capture and a prisoner of war camp.

"It was missing the target that caused the problems," he recalled on Saturday.

Ten of the survivors and their wives were guests of Norfolk Gliding Club when the party completed the second part of their mission of memories at the weekend.

Just a few days before they had revisited Kassel. The rededication of a special memorial, erected four years ago, was an emotional experience, said former pilot Reg Miner, now aged 73 and living in New York State.

German war veterans, politicians and families joined the Americans at a civic banquet. Mementoes were exchanged.

"There is a lot of camaraderie. There is great friendship," said Reg. "We felt right from the start there was no enmity."

In Norfolk on Saturday the American visitors were joined by villagers and members of the Gliding Club at Tibenham Church. The special anniversary memorial service was taken by the Rev Selwyn Swift, who is also a gliding club member.

Then, after coffee and cookies and a chat with the locals, the party headed for the old airfield.

If the flying was off, nostalgia certainly was not.



A time for smiles, half a century after the grimness of war.