

## Life on the Airbase

Very few GIs knew that they were being sent from America to Britain. When they arrived in East Anglia, sometimes in the middle of the night and often with no idea of where they were, they awoke to new sights, sounds and smells. Many GIs recalled the revolting stench of kippers, the taste of meat pies and the unfamiliar texture of porridge.

To help the GIs to adjust to life in Britain the War Department produced a pamphlet called *Instructions for American Servicemen in Britain*. It contained useful information about popular British customs and slang words. It gave strict advice never to criticise the King or Queen, to show off, and in general stressed the need to get along with the British in order to defeat Hitler.

Not many of the Americans were prepared for the weather conditions in Britain and the problem of mud is something that features heavily in diaries and letters of the time. During the period that the Americans were stationed in Britain, a quarter of all days were non-operational because of the appalling weather. William R Sauerland stated:

Mud, mud and still more mud - that's England in the fall

Living conditions on base in general were described as 'rugged'. Many servicemen faced water shortages, and in the early days having a toilet block within walking distance was considered a luxury. In the winters, little coke fuelled stoves provided the often draughty and almost always cold nissen huts with a little warmth.

Fatalities were high, and during the four years the Americans were stationed in the region 26,000 airmen took off from airbases never to return. Dealing with loss became part of everyday life on the airbase and often close friendships between the GIs were torn apart. Jim McMahan recalls:

When Fred was killed, the enlisted men in our crew went down to the flight line and stayed out long after dark waiting for him to return. It was a strange thing to do because we knew he was dead.