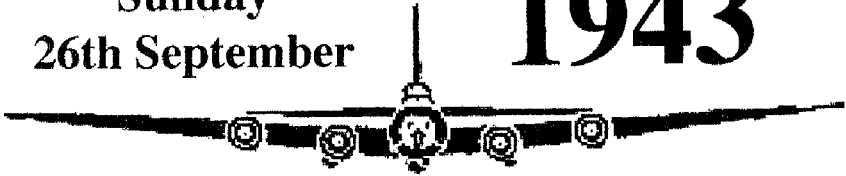


“Lady Luck”

Sunday
26th September

1943



B-17F Flying Fortress Number 42-5434

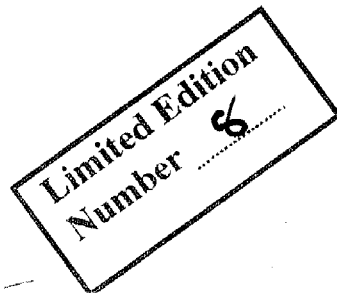
**During World War Two “Lady Luck”
crash landed with a full bomb load
narrowly missing New Alresford**

What *really* happened?

To: New Alresford
Town Council

Nelson Trowbridge
April 2001

Nelson Trowbridge



17th August 1943



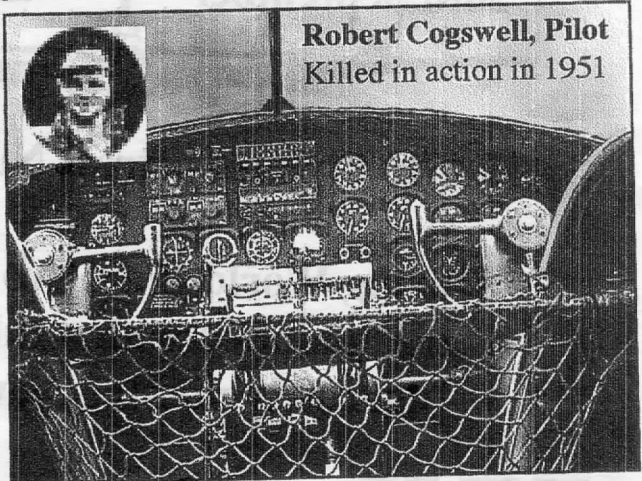
An enlargement of this photograph is displayed in the *Globe Inn* at Alresford, The plane shown is *Iza Vailable* and four members of this crew flew in *Lady Luck* when she crashed beside Old Alresford Pond on the 26th September 1943. *Lady Luck's* navigator was **Edward L. Cobb**, but we have no picture of him, or of the other five crew members that day.



Paul Davis
Ball Turret Gunner
Now dead



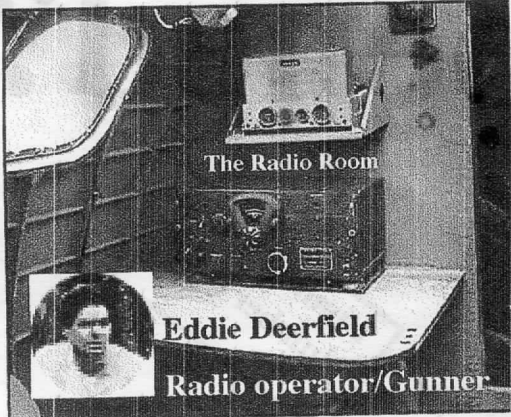
Gilbert Bengston
Engineer
Now dead



Robert Cogswell, Pilot
Killed in action in 1951

Captain Cogswell was flying a B-29 "Superfortress" bomber when it was shot down into the Sea of Japan during the Korean War. He died with all his crew.

T/Sgt Eddie Deerfield, who joined up as a private and retired as a Lt.Col. has been most generous with his time sending me information by e-mails and checking parts of this account.



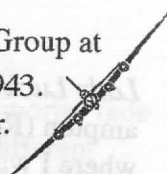
The Radio Room

Eddie Deerfield
Radio operator/Gunner



A .50 calibre
Browning machine gun
in one of two
waist gun positions

Lady Luck was delivered to the USA's 303rd Bomb Group at Molesworth (Cambridgeshire, England) on 6th March, 1943. Our story, however, starts six months and twenty days later.



Take-off

On 26th September 1943, at 2.46 pm Captain Cogswell lifted *Lady Luck* off the runway at Molesworth and, with the rest of the formation, headed for Nazi U-Boat (attack submarine) pens at Nantes in German occupied France. Each crew member wore either a backpack or chestpack parachute from takeoff to landing (or kept it close), which is what saved their lives when they bailed out over Hampshire. T/Sgt Eddie Deerfield sat by his radio with two .50-calibre machine guns in the waist-gun positions not far behind him. Eddie tells me he fired a single gun through a hatch in the roof of the radio room which was situated in the middle of the plane between the wings. Ten five-hundred-pound demolition bombs were in the bomb bays.

A Chaplain was available at Molesworth before each mission, and men who wished to do so were allowed time to attend a short service.

Recall

The round trip had been scheduled to end back at Molesworth at ten past eight in the evening. But at 4.35 pm, while the formation was crossing the English Channel, a radio message was received from 1st Bombardment Division aborting the mission and recalling the aircraft. Bad weather building over the target area was the most likely reason. The formation headed for home, but *Lady Luck* developed a problem.

Problems

One of the four engines developed "runaway propeller" which could not be feathered. The engine began to vibrate, then more violently, and the wing to which it was attached was in danger of breaking off. *Lady Luck* dropped behind the formation (one eye witness reports he saw this). A fire started in the engine and Captain Cogswell realised he could not save the plane. This was serious. It was time to bail out.

The crew bailed out

Lady Luck crossed the south coast between Portsmouth and Southampton (Ref: Eddie), so must have passed over the Isle of Wight where I was a teenager. I might have seen her. We saw many planes limping home. She was flying south of Winchester at about 10,000 feet when the crew were ordered by the pilot to bail out. Captain Cogswell remained at his post to guide the plane, together with its full bomb load, unused ammunition and more than half-full fuel tanks, away from built-up areas. Five men left from the waist section door in rapid succession, and four from the nose.

Landings

Eddie landed in a field somewhere south of Winchester and was momentarily stunned. When he regained consciousness a farm worker was standing over him holding a pitchfork pressed to his chest. He convinced his captor that he was not a German parachutist (no doubt an American accent helped), was taken to a cottage and the police were contacted. The other eight crew members landed in fields, trees and on roofs. None of the nine was seriously hurt, just a few bruises and grazes, and when all had been found they were taken to an RAF hospital where they were checked and spent the night. The next day they were taken back to base.

Captain Cogswell was still in the plane when it passed over New Alresford. He set course for open country and bailed out at the last possible moment, so late that ligaments in his back were torn when his parachute opened. The plane was on its own now, with an engine on fire and one wing falling off. With no pilot, it veered off the set course, turning back 180 degrees. Alresford residents saw this happen. Robert Cogswell probably saw it, too, and would have been horrified. Alresford's centre was again in danger of destruction. Luckily *Lady Luck* lost height fast and crashed on fields just east of the Pond. A few more degrees of turn and a few hundred yards further on and St John's Church might have been smashed (It was Battle of Britain Sunday - perhaps a service was in progress.) or Broad Street demolished.

Lady Luck's crash

From now on the exact truth is difficult to discover. Memories fade during fifty eight years. They also evolve as bits from different people's tales told and retold, merge. However, a "best fit" has emerged. This is what follows, and I believe it is not far from what actually happened.

On impact at about five pm (the mission was aborted at 4.35 pm) the plane rebounded, perhaps somersaulted, and skidded, shattering into "thousands" of pieces including a complete wing, an unbroken gun in its turret, separate guns, engines, unexploded bombs, ammunition and fragments of various sizes scattered over a large area. The fuel caught fire and burned furiously for a short time and, possibly (people report bangs) ammunition near the blaze, exploded. I am told that a person standing by the letter box at the bottom of Broad Street, looking over the old fire station, could see a plume of smoke from the crash site in a straight line beyond,

In the County Record Office, Winchester there is only one relevant incident report (Sheet 442, H/EP1/1, date of incident 26th September 1943, date of report 29/9/1943). This records that two cows owned by Manor Farm (some way away), had been killed, one seriously injured and a fourth slightly injured, but because of war-time regulations no cause is recorded (the *Ministry of Information* had been set up in September 1939). A handwritten annotation following the report states that this incident was not confirmed by the police.

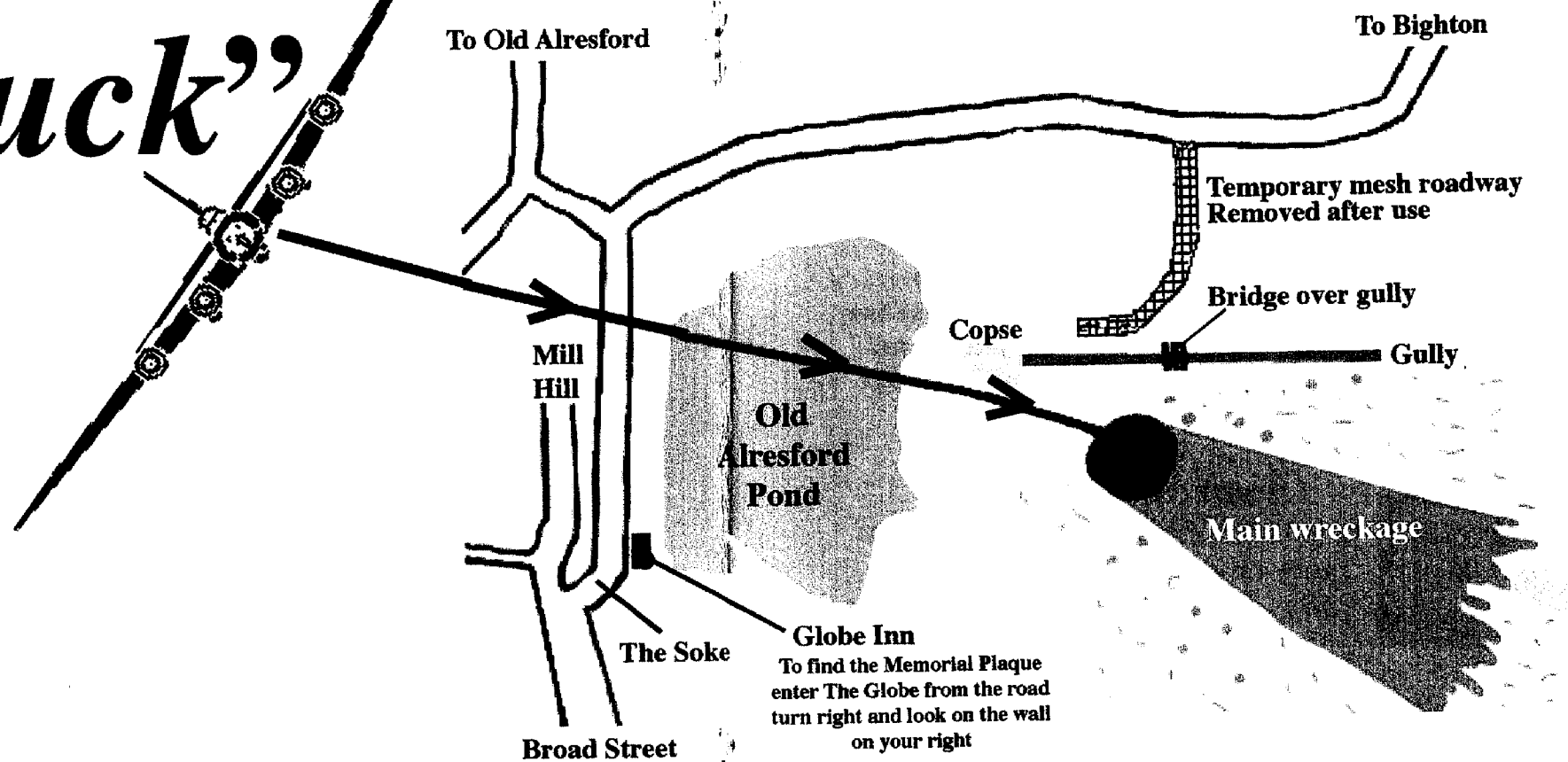
A special constable was stationed to keep people off the site, but teenagers who knew all the paths, still explored! The next day military guards took over.

The next few days

Two residents who were schoolboys at the time, independently collected and kept a couple of rounds of ammunition each, having removed the cordite charges. One was photographed by the Hampshire Chronicle, ammunition in his hand, when Eddie Deerfield and

“Lady Luck”

The crash site

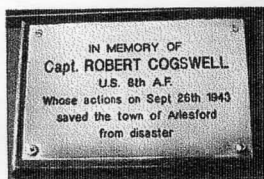


New Alresford

Globe Inn
To find the Memorial Plaque
enter The Globe from the road
turn right and look on the wall
on your right

his wife Mary Lee visited Alresford in 1992. Another resident, one of a gang of three schoolboys at the time of the crash, describes how they took turns to sit in a gun turret and tilt and pan the gun, and how they would have liked to drag a loose gun to their den as a souvenir, but it was too heavy (they thought this gun was from midships, so it might have been Eddie's). The day after the crash, soldiers (said to be Dutch) arrived, collected guns, ammunition and perhaps bombs (these were heavy and dangerous) and stored them in a gully partly covered by a bridge of railway sleepers (previously used by farm tractors) ready to be collected later. The site could not be cleared immediately because the ground was too soft for large vehicles to gain access, but in due course a temporary steel mesh roadway was laid. Then small vehicles crossed the bridge and dragged and carried wreckage to a "Queen Mary" (large recovery vehicle) on the other side. Smaller fragments remained and as time passed were collected as they appeared or were ploughed up, and dropped into the gully. As recently as the mid-nineties small fragments have been found.

Sources



In the Globe Inn, Alresford, there is a plaque (greatly valued by residents and visitors) in memory of Captain Robert Cogswell, and above the plaque there is a crew photograph

framed with two documents. It is great that this memorial to our brave allies was put in place, but look at how Alresford is spelt on the plaque! That's not all. The document on the left refers to the plane as "Lady Luck" (correct), but the one on the right calls the plane "Lucky Lady" (wrong). The right-side cutting also gets Eddie Deerfield's roles wrong - he was the radio operator/gunner, not the navigator as stated. Eddie is still very much alive to testify to what he did on that day. Both accounts assume that the crew in the photograph was the crew on the day, but in fact only four of those men parachuted from *Lady Luck*. Six were newcomers. All sources have to be treated with very great care!

1943 Letter Only one contemporary document (apart from the "cows" incident report) exists. This is a letter written by Mr A.H. Hasted, Chairman, New Alresford Parish Council, to the "Officer Commanding, RAF Station, Middle Wallop". At the time there was no way of knowing where a warplane was based. This letter is dated 28th September 1943 and expresses the heartfelt thanks of the people of Alresford to Robert Cogswell who stayed with the disintegrating plane until the last second. The letter was forwarded, and eventually copies were put in the records of each member of the crew on the day of the crash. I am very grateful to Jill Shackleton, today's Clerk to New Alresford Town Council, and Jill Otway, Assistant Clerk, for finding this letter and sending me a copy.

Two valuable sources from the US Army Air Force are:

- (1) Lt/Col. Eddie Deerfield, a surviving crew member (at least three have died) who continues to send me information by e-mail, and
- (2) The web site: www.303rdbga.com/360cogswell.html

(Short for "303rd Bomb Group A" / 360th Squadron, Captain Cogswell.)

Other web sites are valuable for general information about B-17Fs.

Censorship (By the *Ministry of Information* set up in September 1939)

- (1) No newspaper accounts of the incident were published at the time. Past issues of the *Hampshire Chronicle*, stored on microfiche, can be consulted in the *Local Studies Library* (the staff are extremely helpful) upstairs in the main lending library in Jewry Street, Winchester. Two pieces appeared years later, the first is dated 3rd July 1992 when Eddie Deerfield and his wife Mary Lee visited the area. The other was later, when the plaque was installed in *The Globe*.
- (2) The only information in the County Record Office (more helpful staff here), is the incident report about cows mentioned earlier.

Two gifts have been most helpful, giving me a feel for the site and the plane. I am grateful to: (1) Brian Champion, photographer, for an aerial photograph of New Alresford and the Pond; and (2) to Brian Lee who made a 1/72 scale model (17 inches wing span) of a B-17F which was given to me by his widow, Margaret.

Tape recorded interviews As part of a programme to remember the 50th anniversary of D-Day, Alresford Chamber of Trade and Commerce recorded interviews with twenty four local residents who had memories of World War Two. An edited version called "Memories of Alresford 1944" was produced on audio cassettes for the anniversary on 5th June 1994. Although *Lady Luck's* crash happened in 1943, the tape has content that helped me arrive at my "best fit" account. I am grateful to Bill and Jean Hillary who lent me their copy of the cassette and its insert, and to Julia Roach for arranging the loan.

"Alresford: Hampshire Official Guide" 6th edition, revised 1967, issued by "Alresford Chamber of Trade in conjunction with New Alresford Parish Council".

In a section headed "Wartime Memories" (side 25), twelve lines are devoted to *Lady Luck's* crash. A photocopy of this section was obtained for me by Bill and Barbara Allen who have a friend who owns the book. Thanks to all three.

Talking I have done a lot of this with a large number of people, face to face with some and by telephone and e-mail with others. This, more than anything else, is what has enabled me to arrive at a "best fit" account of what happened from the Alresford perspective. Thank you to everyone. Please forgive me for not listing all your names.

Empty sources Before I realised the full extent of secrecy during the war and the effect this had on record keeping (nobody I spoke to kept a diary, for example), I contacted possible sources such as aircraft museums, government organisations, the *Historical Branch (RAF)* and others, as well as newspaper archives, all with little or no results. Alresford's *Fire and Rescue Service* has no records of incidents that long ago. And so on.

What started all this? Two local men were laying a path in my garden. Both are too young to remember the war, but over a cup of coffee one said "I expect you have heard about the warplane that came down in the Pond?" It was news to me, even after living here for over twenty five years. "People say that when conditions are right

the shape can still be seen from low flying planes”, he continued, “I think it is a fighter”. This story should be easy to piece together, I thought. Wrong! Identifying the aircraft as a Flying Fortress was easy. Finding the crash site took longer. The idea that the plane was *in* the Pond was so widely held that even years later, it attracted a civilian salvage enquiry. Emails, letters, talk, visits and web searches have been fascinating, and the project has taken three months.

What next? A lot of ground round the Pond is marshy and this year conditions are much worse than usual. So I have not been able to walk on the site or take photographs there to send to Eddie, which I promised to do. Luckily I have met a man who was a Water Bailiff looking after the Pond in the 1950s. He knows the land and has offered to escort me when conditions are suitable. Now the foot and mouth disease epidemic is barring access as well. Eventually, however, we shall walk to the site with a camera.

Later, if an Alresford Museum becomes fact, perhaps *Lady Luck* will be a feature there.

Finally

If you would like to examine a photograph of Alresford and the Pond from the air, have your teeth examined by Glenn Gilbertson, an Alresford dentist, and while reclining in his surgery look at the photographic enlargement stuck to the ceiling. His photo is much bigger than mine. Alternatively, you could buy a print from Brian Champion.

Nelson Trowbridge
New Alresford, Hampshire, UK.

Photographs: <u>Plaque</u>	Photographed by me (with permission)
<u>Crew photo</u>	From the web, used by permission of Eddie Deerfield
<u>Three interiors</u>	From the website www.maxrules.com/b17trip2.html

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Printed by inkjet. To avoid fading please keep away from direct sunlight.