

# Toft Historical Society

Tom in 1944



70 years after D-Day, by coincidence, one of the airmen involved in an incident which took place in the skies over Toft in 1944 was alerted to the fact that his name appears on our website. He got in touch with the Society by email and Mike McCarthy chatted with him via Skype. This is the story of **2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Tom Shepard**, erstwhile USAF fighter pilot, stationed at Duxford in 1943-4.

Tom in 2014



**Y**ou may already know the story of a mid-air collision between two USAF fighters above the Hardwick Road and a crash-landing there in 1944. If you don't, be sure to visit the Toft Historical Society Archive page at <http://www.tofthistory.org/archive.html>, where you can see pictures of the wreckage and read extracts from the official accident report. Here's part of the human backdrop to that story.

In April 1943, Tom Shepard, a 22-year-old 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant in the US Air Force, just half a year out of training, arrived at RAF Duxford. He was billeted in the west wing of the officer's mess, which he found surprisingly comfortable and congenial. During the ensuing period when the base was still RAF, he enjoyed NAAFI catering and the use of a bicycle. He and his comrades would cycle into Cambridge, and go on pub crawls and enjoy the social life. Young, and, as he describes himself, naïve, he was surprised on one of his visits to Cambridge to see fresh strawberries on a market stall. Till then he thought strawberries were only grown in Ponchatoula, Louisiana! (Those strawberries might well have been grown in the 'strawberry belt' of which Toft formed part.) When he arrived at Duxford, he had no idea whatsoever how the war was going, how near or how remote victory might be, probably typical of most service personnel at the time. With the benefit of hindsight, we know now that the war was entering its final, decisive phases.

Tom flew Thunderbolts, the veritable war-horse of the USAF fighter fleet. The Thunderbolt had a remarkable ability at diving. Its range was limited but the addition of external fuel tanks extended its reach. Tom describes it as 'the most survivable' of all of the fighter aircraft. He has been back to Duxford on several occasions since the war (as recently as 2012) and 'crawled around' a Thunderbolt, no doubt reviving for him many memories, both happy and sad, of his comrades all those decades ago. One vivid memory he has is of staying up all night on D-minus-1 (one day before D-Day) painting the invasion stripes on the combat aircraft.

Tom has no precise memory of the mid-air collision over Toft, even though he was leading the formation of four planes on the ill-fated training flight. It was common practice to "rat race", with the formation in a line like scuttling rats, doing skilful manoeuvres. If a pilot took his eye off his nearest neighbour, a mishap might occur, and that is what happened over Toft on 5 June 1944, a day before the D-Day landings. The pilots came out alive, but one of the reasons Tom doesn't recall the event was that, sadly, such accidents were not uncommon, with non-combat losses almost equalling those in combat.

A committed anglophile, Tom has been back to the UK often, including visits to the American Cemetery at Madingley. But perhaps his most significant UK experience is that he was chosen to meet HM the Queen in 1997 at Duxford, and boldly told her that he had seen her there once before, in 1943, when she was plain Princess Elizabeth standing on the observation deck of the Duxford control tower with her parents! Tom lives in retirement now in Cranberry Township, PA. In his 95<sup>th</sup> year, he has generously shared his memories with us. We salute you, Tom.