

'LIVING IN SUFFOLK *was a magical time*'

Chuck Dalldorf was sent RAF Bentwaters during the 1970s and 1980s - and has written a memoir of his experience. Danielle Lett finds out more

If you know your local history, you'll no doubt be familiar with fact that this county was once home to an abundance of military bases.

Active throughout the 20th century, these bases were crucial during the Second World War, Cold War and Gulf War, and during their operative years, saw tens of thousands of men and women come and go.

Many of these service personnel came from across the Atlantic - and they certainly left their mark on the local area.

A New York native, at the age of 18 Chuck Dalldorf made the move to Suffolk with the United States Air Force - and he loved his time here so much that he's written a book, entitled 'Notes From The Green Man', recounting his life as an aircraft mechanic between 1977 and 1981.

"I started writing back in 1984, and I've always had this idea of capturing some of these memories. And over time, following a trip back to Suffolk in 2000, I soon realised how many of the older people I'd met during my time had passed away. With that in mind, I wanted to write a thank you letter to the people of Suffolk," he says.

Realising a short letter to the editor of the EADT wasn't going

to cut it, a book proved to be the best solution - so he got to work putting pen to paper.

"What started as a thank you became more of a love letter to both the people and the place. And I wanted to do it before it was too late."

Born in 1959, Chuck grew up in a working class neighbourhood called Sunset Park, and recalls having a fond and happy childhood.

"Things were tough, as they are in all working class families, but growing up in New York City was great. It was exciting. Very early on I learned how to travel on the subway, and as a child I was obsessed with subway maps and imagining different maps and places in the city," he says. "It was a real impetus for me growing up, and the time I spent looking at maps and thinking about the world was definitely an instigator when deciding the path I would take later in life."

Chuck attended high school on Coney Island, and by the time graduation rolled around, he knew he had to decide what he was going to do next.

"I realised as a student there were a lot more talented students than myself, so my ability to go to university was limited, if not non-existent. This was also

BELOW:
Chuck on his last shift
on June 25, 1981

MAIN:
Chuck in Tunstall in
March 1980

Pictures: CHUCK
DALLDORF





during a time of high inflation, and I'd hoped to go into the workforce, but the job market was tough. So I ended up joining the military, as a lot of people did.

"But it was more about an economic reality than a motivation - it honestly had nothing to do with patriotism or service."

Chuck visited a number of recruiters before deciding on the United States Air Force.

"I was in the recruiter's office, and he was telling me what all the others had, but then I saw this world map on the wall. The recruiter said: 'This is where we have bases across the world', and from there I knew that I wanted to join the Air Force."

ABOVE:
Chuck with a Sunday
roast in The Green
Man April 24, 2022

Chuck signed on the dotted line, and in the summer of 1977, made his way to boot camp where he enlisted in a technical training programme for aircraft fuel systems maintenance.

"Prior to joining the Air Force, I'd never flown in a plane, so it was funny to me that I found myself as an aircraft engineer."

Shortly into his training, Chuck received his orders for a follow-up assignment - which would soon change his life.

"My orders were for this place I hadn't even heard of," he muses.

"It said 'RAF Bentwaters and RAF Woodbridge', and I was like 'What does that mean? Oh, I'm going to England - this is fantastic!'"

One fateful December evening, a fresh-faced Chuck was flown across the Atlantic to begin his service in Blighty.

"I was surprised it was so close to the holidays, as I thought I'd stay for Christmas, but when I went back home for Thanksgiving, I realised I didn't need to spend anymore time in New York. I was already in another place in my head, and getting out turned out to be a good thing."

Going in blind, Chuck admits he didn't know what to expect upon arriving.

"I remember at some point thinking to myself 'wow, I'm

Continued on page 14

Continued from page 13

going to England - but what do I know about it?' Well, I watch Monty Python, so that turned out to be a good starting point, but otherwise I didn't know much.

"As we were approaching RAF Mildenhall, people were looking out of the plane and somebody said 'Oh my god, those cars are on the wrong side of the road!' And it was then I realised I should've done more research," he laughs.

As Chuck and his fellow airmen landed, it's a moment he vividly remembers, 45 years later.

"I'll never forget how I felt. It was a stunning moment, and an indicator of how things were going to be. It was December 13, 1977, and a remarkably sunny and crystal clear day. It wasn't too cold, and the light was astonishing. We all stepped off the plane and so many of us were stood looking at the fields and sun, thinking how mindboggling it all was."

The servicemen were quickly divided into their coaches so they could be sent to their respective airbases.

"I remember when we got to the coach, and we had a struggle getting on. Four or five of us who had never left the country before were stood on the wrong side of the bus, trying to find the door. Then the bus driver popped his head round and said 'Oi, this side! We drive on the proper side over here.'"

As Chuck made his way from RAF Mildenhall to RAF Bentwaters, he recalls how surreal that moment felt, saying it was 'magical'.

"I was jetlagged and it felt almost dream-like."

As he arrived at his new home, Chuck immediately knew he wanted to explore Suffolk and see what this great (and green) county had to offer.

"I realised about an hour in I wanted to get out there. I met a technical sergeant who was in charge of the new arrivals, and he had married a local after integrating himself into the community. Talking to him made me realise there's a whole world out there, and getting away from the base was going to be key to my survival and sanity.

"That first trip was crazy. I didn't understand how things worked, like money. I remember standing at what was The Cherry Tree Pub in Bromeswell (which is now The Unruly Pig), and going to pay for my pint. The barman told me how much it was, and I just pulled out this handful of change, handed it over, and asked him to take the money. It was when people were still using shillings, pence, and halfpence, and I couldn't understand how you could have half a penny - but it was part of the fun and adventure."

As Chuck integrated himself into Suffolk country living, he soon realised how integral pub life was to the community.

"You'd go to the pub, and everyone was so kind, which was great at helping any homesickness. We had invitations to visit people in their homes, and everyone was so welcoming and gracious to us crazy kids.



Chuck during his last shift on June 25, 1981



The Green Man pub during the spring of 1979



Chuck in Suffolk during the winter, 1979

"I think for a lot of Americans, it's hard to understand how important pubs were, especially at that time. And I still think that's true today. I didn't have kids, and I wasn't part of a church or a club, so meeting people would've otherwise been challenging, but we had the pub."

It was through his locals that Chuck met a variety of characters - many of whom have left a lasting impression with him.

"I met farmers, handy people, officer workers, and more. I was able to meet all sorts of people who were so wonderful and funny. I remember this one retired Royal Army colonel, who was a real character.

"And the publicans I met were special. I'll never forget Dick Bird at The White Hart in Aldeburgh. He was a wonderful man who was fab and easy-going. He introduced me to everyone in Aldeburgh, and went out of his way for me. And at The Green Man in Tunstall, the publicans were Reg and Monica Harper and they were incredibly special people who took care of me."

During his first year in Suffolk, Chuck was living on base - but he soon realised he had ambitions to live off-base, giving him the full Suffolk experience.

"Transport was challenging, and we did a lot of hitchhiking to start with. As a New Yorker, I didn't have a car or driving licence, so I would've had to go through the UK driving licence system."

Instead, Chuck got himself a motorbike which made it easier to get around - soon allowing him to move into a flat in nearby Aldringham.

Service personnel were

discouraged from moving off-base unless they had their own form of transportation, in case they were needed in an emergency.

"Moving off-base was nice, and Aldringham was fab location-wise, as I was near Leiston and Aldeburgh so I got to know a lot of the pubs and people really well on my travels.

"However, the only downside of that flat was that it was leased out to a bunch of Americans, so it was essentially like on-base housing, and I didn't like that."

But Chuck's prayers were eventually answered, as a cottage in the heart of the Suffolk countryside became available. It would become his home for the final stretch of his stay between 1979 and 1981.

"Corner Cottage was a traditional sort of cottage - it had three rooms upstairs, a little sitting room, tiny kitchen, and the loo on the ground floor. It was spectacular, and I loved it. I really felt at home there, and it was the most special place I've ever lived. I still dream of it and look at pictures of it. And living there meant I was closer to both the base and The Green Man pub."

That wonderful Suffolk hospitality extended beyond the pub as Chuck became close with one of his neighbours.

"I remember Mrs Knight - she lived across the road from me and came round to use my phone one day as she didn't have one. She'd come round for tea and I had a list of questions about how things worked. She was my guide to rural life here in Suffolk."

By this point, things were going great for Chuck.



ABOVE:
RAF Woodbridge
flight line, 1980

LEFT:
Chuck visiting a
plaque at the former
RAF Bentwaters,
dedicated to his
friend James Ray
Short who was killed
while working on an
aircraft fuel tank in
the hangar on April
17, 1978

Pictures: CHUCK
DALLDORF

He had his cottage, his friends across Suffolk, and he was excelling at work.

But unfortunately one day, due to a shortage of non-commissioned officers back home, he received the news that his time here was to come to an end.

"I convinced myself I was going to be able to stay as long as I wanted - it never occurred to me that they'd send me back. I kept thinking at the eleventh hour, I'd figure out a plan - but it never happened.

"It was disappointing, but I realised at the time I hadn't thought a lot about my future. I knew I wasn't going to stay in the military forever - I eventually wanted to get out and go to university.

"I remember barely feeling homesick when I moved from America to Suffolk - but going from Suffolk to California was terrible. I was horribly homesick."

While Chuck left Suffolk in 1981, he has been back many times - and still feels that same fondness for the place he did all those years ago.

"My wife Lindsey and I came over and stayed in Woodbridge for a month this spring, and it was spectacular. She fell in love with the place, and she couldn't get over it. We walked a lot of footpaths, and I became friends with local map maker Wilfred George who makes these beautifully hand-drawn maps of

Suffolk, so we used a couple of those."

And of course, Chuck had to stop off and have a few pints in some of his former locals.

"Going back to The Green Man, even though it's different now, is such a wonderful and emotional experience. When I went to the pubs, I wore my little Air Force pin, and it was a great talking point. I'd get chatting to people and start sharing my memories of the bases. It was just magical."

Chuck's memoir, 'Notes From The Green Man', is due to be released by a small independent publisher in autumn 2023.

"I didn't realise how green I was, in terms of being young and inexperienced. I thought I knew everything, like you do at that age. And that's where the name of the memoir came from. It also relates back to the green uniform I used to wear, and of course pays homage to the pub I used to frequent.

"Suffolk is one of the most beautiful places in the world, there's no doubt about it. I've travelled three-quarters of the world and have never experienced a place like Suffolk. And it's the people that helped make it so special."

Did you know Chuck during his time here in Suffolk? Or did you or any of your family have a similar experience? Get in touch with danielle.lett@archant.co.uk to share your stories and photos.