



Boyhood Memories

by Fred Giddings

The first memories I have about the second world war are seeing the Spitfires flying over our village, and at the time we didn't know that they were based at Membury Airfield but that was the war, later on we got used to the various types of other aircraft gracing the skies above us such as the Mustang, Thunderbolt, Lockheed Lightning and finally the famous C47 Dakota. It was around about the time when the 8th USAAF were at the airfield that the local boys ventured out to see what was going on, much to our surprise we managed to get onto the base without too much bother. Anyway, it did not take us long to make friends with the newly arrived Americans. We were soon shining their boots and shoes in return for candy, comics and anything else we could get. I remember standing in line at meal times for the different foods that were on display and being offered kippers with jam on top of them, but I think my favourite in those days was corned beef hash and baked beans, which still goes down well to this day. Another memory later on is walking the three miles from home to go to the cinema at Membury and the procedure we had to go through to get there. First you had to show the guard at the gate the two brass tags that you wore round your neck, then he would check them out on a list that he had, then, if the guard was satisfied he would give you two compressed cardboard type discs - one that would give you entrance into the cinema and the other one allowed you to have either an orange, coke drink or ice cream. You could only have one of these items so what we used to do was to each get a different one and share it around with each other. This used to make the yanks laugh and they would ask why are you guys doing that and we would explain - more often than not we would end up with all three things courtesy of the yanks. With all this fraternizing other jollies came our way such as rides in the C47s and Piper Cubs. I remember one such flight, two of us were sitting on the fence at the end of one of the runways watching the planes take off when one of them stopped close to us. This was our cue to make a dash to the side of the C47 and see if we could

scrounge some chocolate that they carried on board, on reaching the side of the plane we spotted an airman just inside the doorway. We shouted out for any chocolate and he produced the biggest bar you have ever seen, he then offered it to us and we both reached up to get some when he dropped it on the floor and grabbed our outstretched hands and pulled us both into the inside of the plane. By the time we had got our wind back the C47 was moving down the runway to take off, we were told to sit in the metal seats and not to move. Looking out of the window and seeing the ground getting further and further away it started to frighten us both but the airman told us not to worry for we were quite safe. With those reassuring words we settled down to enjoy the adventure we were on. When the plane started to come down at a different airfield we started to fret again but were told to stay where we were, some men came on board and started to throw the bags off into the back of a lorry and when it was loaded it drove off and another one took its place, then some different men proceeded to throw bags back onto the plane and the last two to come on were blue coloured bags. The empty lorry moved away and the plane began to move off ready for takeoff. Eventually we arrived back to our home airfield and after landing and the unloading procedure was over we were told to get into a small truck. It could have been a jeep or even a dodge weapons carrier, anyway we got in and the two blue bags were placed in with us. The pilot said something to the driver and he then drove us back to Lambourn, on arriving at the square we disembarked thanking the driver and we both asked him to thank the crew of the C47. On doing this we turned to leave when he called us back saying "don't you guys want your B bags? He then handed one to each of us, waved goodbye and drove off. Well, if you were a twelve year old lad with a massive big bag what would you do first - yes, we did just that - dived straight in to find out what was what, you name it, it was in there - comics, candies, chocolates, cigarettes, fruit, oranges, bananas, tin foods and a lipstick for my mum. Many a time we paid visits to Membury

after that and they were all great adventures to us, even being shot at while being in a restricted area ! None of us were one hundred per cent good, not even me !

I have already stated that we went to the cinema, I can still recall the different coloured parachutes hanging from the ceiling, and if you go back there today you can still see the hooks that held the screen up and the remains of the projection room at the end of the old building. Calling in at the PX (NAAFI) to see if there was anything going spare (sweets etc), one day while playing with a large hunting knife belonging to one of the Americans I somehow managed to cut my wrist and was taken to the base hospital to have it stitched up by one of their doctors. I was sent home in a jeep so that the local doctor could check it out and then got a slap across my rear by my mother for being such a stupid boy and also for getting into trouble.

Being caught in one of the hangers one day I was given the punishment of sweeping the hanger floor clean, but it was more of a reward to me as it allowed me to get up close to the planes. Thunderbolts if a recall properly, I can remember they were single engine planes and they were fat and chubby like. Also, playing on the aircraft firing range where we collected the bullet points and sometimes the brass cartridge cases quite unaware that we could all be in danger from unexploded bullets that were there. This range was in the shape of a crescent moon placed under the trees at the side of Membury Fort.

I can also recall that the village boys had their sites that they went to and we were lucky as our street had three such sites that we visited, but there was also an unwritten law that no one else would trespass on each other sites and this was pretty well kept to. Occasionally, someone would try their luck but if they were caught the lord help them, they did not try it again.

At one time, recalling all the bell tents with RAF personnel living in them this was at the same time as the 8th USAAF were still based at Membury. Further research shows it was to do with Exercise Spartan, but at this period of time we were not

allowed any where near the actual airfield, and if the truth was known we should not have been on the base itself. One thing can be said that of all the forays to the airfield and its surrounding sites none of the boys ever got into serious trouble with the American personnel and I personally think this is why they laid on a huge party for the children of the village. Time fades memory and I don't recall the party as such but I do remember on the way home one of the canvas covered Dodge trucks went up the bank and tipped over, fortunately no one being hurt, just shaken.

One vivid recollection is playing truant from school one day with a friend of mine and to cut a long story short we were in some fields between Eastbury and Wantage trying to catch some rabbits when this aeroplane started to buzz us, so we took off our coats and began waving them at the plane and with that it came and landed close to us. Well, as soon as it stopped we both ran to it to find out what was wrong. It appeared there was nothing wrong with the plane but the pilot had spotted us and came down to see what we were doing. After explaining the reason for being there he said we should be at school, we answered yes but we needed the rabbits for tomorrows dinner. The next thing he said was would we both like to have a fly in this Cub ? The thought of catching rabbits vanished in a flash and almost before we had said yes we were sitting behind the pilot. After a short take off the plane was up and flying low over the downs towards Lambourn. We then circled round the village a couple of times then headed for Membury where it landed. After landing the pilot told us to follow him and we then got into a jeep. The pilot then proceeded to drive us back to the village. Great we thought, a plane and a jeep ride all in one day, but our joy turned to horror when the jeep turned into the school yard and we were taken to see the headmaster. On hearing about our escapade that day he thought it only fitting that we should be punished so we both ended up with having the cane across our backsides and whilst it hurt at the time a lovely memory of that day lives on plus not forgetting the pilot for the flight and the trouble he caused us on returning us to school. A short time later on going to the crash site of a C47 Dakota where fourteen navigators and the

crew lost their lives and being turned back by the soldiers that were present, and also running out of the school playground when two Tiger Moths landed two fields away, with yet another caning from the teacher, also going to the POW camp at Lodge Down and tormenting the Italian prisoners by calling them wops and cowards and being chased up the road by the camp guards.

All the Americans we knew were Airforce personnel and they were quite a friendly bunch of guys but a very big shock was awaiting us one morning on the way to school via the local sweet shop. We were coming down what is called Edwards Hill when we caught sight of some strangely dressed soldiers standing near the top of the High Street. Not being close enough to hear what they were saying, plus the strange uniforms they were wearing as they weren't dressed like the British soldiers nor like the American airmen. They wore helmets and boots that looked German and their uniforms were nothing like any we had seen before, so we all came to the same conclusion that they **must** be Germans. We took to our heels and ran to the school. On reaching it and all in a panic we found one of the male teachers and told him what we had seen, he then told us not to be so stupid and to stop telling stories but we insisted that we were telling the truth, so along with another teacher they proceeded to go down the alley towards the High Street. On spotting these strange looking soldiers they got as near as possible without being seen. After a few minutes of listening they decided that the men were of American origin, the long and short of it being that one of the soldiers came to the school and told all the assembled children that they were indeed American Paratroopers and that they meant us no harm.

So began another adventure, and being much closer to home this took on a different theme because, with the food rationing that was on at the time, the local boys asked if their mothers could do any laundry for them in exchange for items of food, and much to our surprise the paratroopers agreed, my mother being quite happy to go along with the arrangements. Every Sunday afternoon along with my brother we would collect the dirty

washing and return it clean on the Wednesday night and also collect the next batch to be returned on the Sunday again, this work carried on until the paratroopers were flown out for the Normandy drop, but before this event took place I think all the local folk got their fair share of goodies. I know that I did and the most prized thing was a pair of jump boots that were about two sizes too big for me and a trench knife plus all the normal things the troops gave us, but I believe that our gang went to the 1st Battalion HQ at Windsor House Stables and were the only kids to get home made fudge from the Americans in Lambourn.

Just prior to the troops going away on D.Day they all accumulated for a mass parachute drop to the north west of the village on an area known as Mandown Gallops. On seeing all of these chutes coming down from the sky we all went full tilt towards them, but by the time we arrived there the main of the troops had gone and there were only a few men left to gather in the chutes that were all over the place, so we volunteered to help collect them. Now, I know that two went missing because the following day I returned to collect one white and one camouflaged chute that I had hidden down a badgers set. Having managed to get these items back home the chutes were turned into a wedding dress and undergarments, as I was later told by my mother.

The sad thing about some memories are the loss of some good friends that you have made over a period of time, like the day when on returning some laundry I found no-one there, all the stables empty with just a few comics and the odd pack of cigarettes lying around and taking the washing back home and telling what we had found. My dad later took it to the camp at Membury and was told that they may never return at all. (Out of the 1457 men of the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment, 727 men were killed or went missing in action).

To conclude my memories, some were good and some were sad, but we all remember "our" Americans in the Lambourn and Membury area of Berkshire during the second world war period.

