

# When the War Came to Faringdon

*More and more details of wartime events can now be found on the internet. Sections detailing investigations by special interest groups and the BBC's archive 'The Peoples' War' provide hitherto unknown details about WW2 in the Faringdon area, and have confirmed some memories of life-long local resident Joe Pauling. The chairman's been Googling again.*

## **Part I. The Civilian Perspective - Motorboats and Horsas**

### Local Recollections

Many generations of Anthony Field's family lived and worked in Faringdon. His grandfather was a director of the firm Vale Engineering Ltd, Agricultural Engineers and Anthony recalled that the firm was contracted prior to D-Day to equip dozens of jeeps with cutting devices to deal with wires that the enemy might string across roads.

David Sheringham attended boarding school in the town during the years 1940-46.

He recalled 'Wings for Victory' displays in the Square, and the boys being excited seeing a Spitfire on show; the regular Sunday morning walks to Littleworth Church past mountains of ammunition piled alongside the roads; the Black American troops marching in time while calling out 'Hip, Hup, Hi, Haw'; the 2-day excitement of VE celebrations.

During the years 1940-41 John R Copland was a child evacuee to Faringdon from his home in Surrey. Although homesick, he found his hosts and local people very friendly and looked back fondly on his time there.

From his article; -

'I only remember one air raid warning, after dark at about 9pm, but I don't think there was any anti-aircraft fire. We could hear the sound of a single aircraft in the darkness and one bomb swooshed down but didn't explode. The next evening several of us lads took a stroll along Station Road, past the timber yard towards the farm where there was a small earth crater in a swede field at the crossroads. A policeman there said it was not yet clear whether the bomb had failed

to go off in the soft ground or if it was delayed action. In any case we kept our distance. Around this time, from high ground after dark I could see a glow on the horizon to the east and was told it was London on fire. In the opposite direction was Bristol burning, showing starkly because of the blackout. Everyone was very worried by what was happening, but took great comfort from the BBC wireless broadcasts, which seemed almost compulsory listening, and sometimes included speeches from Winston Churchill.

'There were always soldiers to be seen in Faringdon. Lots of Military lorries drove through and there was a large wooden hut where groups of soldiers would take their meals between Christopher Square and Bromsgrove. Sometimes we would have a few words with them on our way back to school in the afternoon.

'Twice I recall wrecked aircraft passing through the town on huge trailers. One plane I saw maneuvered along past the Market Place and on up London Street was a Wellington Bomber, with separated wings plus engines tucked each side of the fuselage. It was a slow process because of the telephone posts, shops and public house signs etc. but it was managed by a skilled crew. The other occasion involved a Junkers 88, which was parked along the top of the Market Place. I had a look at the fuel tanks in the wings, noting the thick black rubber outer cover and gray cardboard inner part. The damaged area was something we lads marvelled at - an amber coloured rubber inner lining. It was a self-sealing rubber fuel tank which one of the boys demonstrated by cutting. We watched it seal and grow together again in front of our eyes - clever. If a bullet or shell splinter penetrated there would be a good chance of preventing a fuel leak.

'A rather quirky memory was once when I walked up Folly Hill with my friend Billy. Nearing the tower we heard a siren-like shriek, which came from a Blenheim bomber flying low over the town. It circled the tower making a terrific scream. We thought perhaps it was a new weapon like that used by the Stuka dive-bombers. The strange thing was we found no one else who saw the Blenheim, let alone heard it!

'On one occasion Mr. Ball, owner of the house where

wake them up a bit'.

Another youngster, Geoff Saunders, spent the war years as an evacuee in Clanfield.

In his early teens, he found a weekend job helping with the boat hirings at the Swan Inn at Radcot Bridge.

'Radcot had it's own unusual Home Guard section, but it was not known as such, it was the Upper Thames



*"A satellite view of Radcot Bridge and the Swan Inn. Having two bridges close together, the area was similar, if rather smaller than the bridges over the Orne river and Caen Canal, which were prime objectives on D-Day. Compare this with the photo below."*

I was staying, and his son Desmond, borrowed a bike for me, along with a fishing rod and tackle and took me fishing in the Thames. It was a bright fresh day, the journey did not seem very long and we settled on the steep sides of a field. I remember a small thatched cottage directly opposite, across the river. Then came an added attraction, I was the first to hear a faint whisper of a high speed engine and as I turned to look up over the big field directly behind us, there, pointing directly at us and coming at a terrific speed was a Spitfire fighter, perhaps 10 feet above the ground. It took us all by surprise. We jumped off the bank into the clay on the edge of the river. It pulled up into a climbing turn to the left and rolled off into the distance, one could almost imagine the pilot having a good grin at us and probably thinking, "This will

Patrol or UTP, a far grander title! They had their own cap badge and shoulder flashes. Their HQ was at The Swan where they had commandeered half of the building, which stood just by the first bridge coming from Clanfield. They also had the use of the Swan's two motorboats, "Salamis" and "Pimms 2".

"Salamis" was a sturdy little boat with an inboard engine. "Pimms" was the one most often used, as she was small, with an outboard motor, much lighter and easier to use.

'Ted Tyler was in charge with the rank of Captain, I think. They paraded every Sunday morning and sometimes had boat drill. One such morning they set off with Ted and two or three others, and had gone some way upstream when the outboard fell off the transom

and into the river. Someone had not tightened the clamps! In their efforts to recover the motor, Ted fell awkwardly and hurt his ribs. It seemed to me that he was never the same man after this.

'They appeared back at the boat yard looking very sheepish. Shortly after that, Ted was replaced by another Captain who was an entirely different character, rather pompous in his manner, almost a role model for Captain Mainwaring! One lasting memory I have of him: parade was over and it was time for boat drill. The Captain announced in his best plummy voice "Everyone will take a turn to drive the boat" The audience fell about!!

'There were lots of jobs there for the men of the village while some of the women worked at the straw mill which was at Little Clanfield. The mill made straw rope which was used to pack round delicate things like bombs, I think.

'Time went on, and whilst we were not troubled by air raids and such, the war was getting nearer. Bright orange-coloured trainer planes flew over at all times during the day, and occasionally we would see a pall of black smoke, which people said came from one of them crashing. Glider pilots were being trained at Brize Norton, the Horsa gliders were towed by Whitley bombers. They took off from the aerodrome, flew to a certain height and then released for the pilot to fly the glider back to base. They did not always make it back and landed wherever they could. I

remember one landing in a field up Cowcroft Lane. The glider touched down on the right hand side of the lane, ploughed through the hedge, across the highway and finished up in Mr. Wallis's big field. We lads were soon on the scene and were allowed to look inside it. The floor was covered with large concrete slabs to simulate a full cargo of, I believe, 36 men and equipment.

'The war was gathering pace now and the Americans had arrived, TA-RA-RA! They seemed to be everywhere, but how different to the British troops - no bugle calls, no drill, plenty of everything else, especially money! We lads wandered freely among them. Some were billeted in Jeffers' Barn, opposite the Masons Arms and we got our fair share of the gum and candy, as they called it. Many of them were black, which was new to us, we'd never seen a black man before. *[By this time, the US ammunition depot just outside Faringdon was well established, served by the 100th and 101st Ordnance Ammunition Battalions. Ed]*

'D-Day was rapidly approaching, the military action was getting intense with mock battles, pontoon bridges across the river, beehive mines under the bridges, ammunition dumps beside the road guarded by a solitary and very bored G.I. low level parachute drops from Dakota's - all great fun for teenagers to watch. Not so good for some youngsters from the village who found a live mortar shell on The Lines. It

exploded and some of the children received phosphorus burns, which have probably scarred them for life.'

Elisabeth Holding, who lived in Grove House, Faringdon between 1937 and 1942 recalled; -

'From our house we looked straight down towards Witney and Brize Norton and frequently saw the yellow training planes flying low over the hedges and fields. I was told that they were Harvards and Oxfords. The pilots of the versatile Tiger Moth biplanes practiced loops

TEXT:- Transport.

To:- Sn.Comd.

From:- S.Mid.Area.

Reference your letter Z/7038/G, dated 11th August.

G.C. H.Q. Auxiliary Units is now at Northgate House, FARINGDON, the H.Q. of No.1 Armd.Edg.Coy. R.A.S.C.

That unit, owing to a multiplicity of commitments, is unable to provide the Auxiliary Units with any permanent transport.

Transport is, however, urgently required for collecting stores, and also for tactical purposes.

May hire of a 30-cwt. lorry be sanctioned?

OXFORD.  
EA.

HEADQUARTERS  
SALISBURY  
21 AUG 1940  
7038  
SOUTHERN COMMAND

GENERAL STAFF  
1740. 16446  
21 AUG 1940  
HEADQUARTERS  
SOUTHERN COMMAND

SECRET.

88/440/Q.  
20th Aug.40.

B3913  
11a

leese, Allen  
Commander, S.Mid.Area.

*This recently released copy of a letter between Army units confirms that the Auxiliary Units' HQ was located in Northgate House, Faringdon in 1940. Photo via K Blaxhall.*

and spins. There must have been many losses of pilots as occasionally spirals of black smoke were seen. Once when we were in a punt hired from the Swan Hotel at Radcot, a plane came over us very low and must have circled round to impress my older sister and her friend, but he failed to make it and crashed into the field beside us. My father and mother rushed to try and help him but the plane exploded and was engulfed in flames before they could do anything. I can still see the pilot's face. No counsellors then to help with the trauma!

Italian and German prisoners of war who worked on local farms were dropped off and later picked up by two open lorries, which parked outside Grove House. The Italians were in one lorry and the Germans in another. In the winter afternoons they used to be coming back to the lorries at about the same time as we came home from school. The Italians would always say "Hello", smile and wave; the Germans were always solemn and quiet.

'Among our friends in early 1940 was the Hampshire family. Susan, subsequently a well-known actress, was then two years old. Her older sisters played with my sisters, and my brother, who was at Oxford, used to let Susan to sit and draw pictures with crayons at his table when he was studying. Perhaps all that Latin and Greek caused her dyslexia.

'My father's contribution to the war effort was fire watching in Swindon as his office was there. My three elder brothers were all called up. My mother used to spend each Sunday afternoon writing to them. I can still recall their service numbers with which she addressed the envelopes.'

Joe recalls: - It's strange that none of the contributors remembers the Royal Marine's camp which was behind what is now Butts Road. It was certainly there during the war and for years afterwards. It had its own recreation hall, which was used by the local amateur dramatic society among others, long after the camp closed.

There were lots of soldiers around Faringdon throughout the war, but during the early years, it is quite likely that at least some of them were employed in making the preparations at the Coleshill Estate. As this letter proves, by mid-August 1940 Northgate house was the designated temporary HQ of the Auxiliary Units.

The morning after it happened, my mother told me about the bomb that was dropped near Faringdon one night, although it didn't wake me up at the time. Whether it subsequently went off on its own, or was blown up in situ by the bomb disposal people, I don't know, but for years afterwards, there was a huge hole in one of the fields up by the Coxwell Crossroads. [*A circular feature is clearly visible using Google Earth, situated close by the crossroads.- Ed*]

Up near there, there was an aircraft that crashed. I went up with a pal of mine to investigate, but as we got close, a chap in blue overalls turned us back. He wasn't a policeman, so perhaps he was part of a salvage team or something like that.

### Asides - 1)

#### Postwar Accident

Joe also recalled that during the Cold War, a USAF B-47 crashed near Radcot Bridge. Official records indicate that the accident occurred during the evening of 20th July 1954, and involved a B-47E, serial No 51-17385 of the 68th Bomb Wing. The aircraft was on temporary detachment at RAF Fairford, and crashed during a Ground Controlled Approach. The resulting huge explosion and fireball was observed to the south of RAF Brize Norton from the control tower. Faringdon Fire Brigade reached the scene more than half an hour before the USAF fire tender, rescue services and security detail. Sadly, all three crew members perished. More than 20 years later, a group of metal detector enthusiasts found pieces of wreckage from the aircraft, including a throttle pulley and a panel fastener inscribed 'Boeing'.

### Asides - 2)

The Ultimate Early-warning Device [*This is such a unique titbit, the editor couldn't resist including it.*]

M.R.Spurgeon spent two years as an evacuee in Faringdon. She told an astonishing story about events that took place after she returned home to her parents' home in Kent.

'When Hitler first launched his V1 flying bombs I was living in Bexley, Kent, which lay on the path that they took en route to London. The first of these doodlebugs flew almost overhead and many landed in the neighbourhood. Most nights the air-raid siren would go and my brother and I would jump into our siren suits and, with my mother and baby sister, hurry downstairs and round to next-door, where we shared an indoor air-raid shelter. It was a mad rush to get there before the doodlebug arrived. Frequently we could hear it's unmistakable drone before we reached the safety of the shelter.

'This mad rush became a thing of the past when I discovered that I had my own early warning system, so much more reliable than radar and the siren. I had a bed where the mattress rested on a metal spring base and I soon realised that this spring base resonated to the frequency of the doodlebug engine. Before the drone of the doodlebug could be heard, several minutes before the siren sounded, the springs of my bed began to twang, loud enough to awaken me. I would then inform my mother that the bed was twanging and we would be up, dressed and round to the shelter next-door by the time the air-raid warning could be heard.

'It never worked with aircraft or the V2 rockets, but as long as the V1 doodle-bugs continued, this early warning system worked perfectly.'

## Part 2. The View from Those in Uniform - Practice Makes Perfect

Another valuable source of information about the Faringdon area is the regimental history of the Royal Artillery, in particular the diary of the Air Landing Anti-Tank Battalions.

The diary of the 3rd Battn. for 1944 shows the systematic build up in activity in the weeks prior to D-Day. The area around Radcot Bridge was chosen for several exercises because of its similarity to the topography around the river Orne in Normandy, where the bridges that became famous as Pegasus and Horsa were situated. With the large store of high explosive ammunition nearby, the exercises required careful planning. During the months before D-Day airborne artillery batteries practiced maneuvering there with the Para's (as noted in G. Saunders' recollections above). Nothing was left to chance and all of the artillery sections had at least one experience of landing there by glider. Pontoon bridges were erected and dismantled, the Thames was crossed in various

some of the airborne task force to land by sea, and this too was rehearsed thoroughly.

### From the RA War Diaries: -

2nd March A detachment of Airborne Artillery left Bulford for Hampstead Norris to instruct glider pilots in unloading their guns from gliders.

19th March Battn. loaded gliders at Brize Norton and Harwell to prepare for Exercise Bizz 1.

Next day: - All troops airborne from Brize Norton & Harwell, but exercise cancelled due to adverse weather.

21st March 2130 hrs, Exercise Bizz I commenced

22nd March Faringdon 0200hrs Bty deployed with 5th Para to area around Radcot. 1400hrs, Bty moved to Gt Coxwell

23rd March, Bty returned to Bulford.

25th March, Bty deployed by road to Faringdon area with Royal Ulster Rifles for exercise Bizz II.

26th March, Took up positions on Badbury Hill, Coleshill and Bury Hill with Ox & Bucks LI & Devonshire Regt.

27th March Bty returned to Bulford.

9th April Bty embarked on LST's (Landing Ship, Tank) at Southampton. After 3 days at anchor, Bty landed at Slapton Sands for Exercise Trousers until 14th.

19th April Bty travelled by road to Painswick (Glos) for Exercise Mush, taking place around the Down Ampney area.

The next few weeks were taken up with firing practice at Bulford, with a night parachute drop on Salisbury Plain involving all those intended to land by parachute on D-Day.

24th and 25th May Sections of the Battn moved to Keevil, Tarrant Rushton, and the Southampton area,

to prepare for the invasion. Other sections moved a few days later to Harwell and Brize Norton airfields.

From the records of Major John Cramphorn A Troop, 4th Air Landing A/T Battn, RA, comes more detail: -

'End of February, Battn moved to Sennybridge, S Wales, for firing practice in support of Rifle Companies.

March. We all trained to fit and release either a weapons valise, or a "kit bag" during a parachute



3rd Battn Air Landing A/T Brigade, RA practice unloading their equipment from a Horsa Glider at Hampstead Norris. [IWM photo via Web]

ways, swimming, amphibious vehicles, as well as via the bridge, and the antitank guns were sited and re-sited in realistic battle simulations. There was even one occasion when an artillery detachment guarding Radcot Bridge was overwhelmed in a surprise attack by the Para's (a realistic rehearsal for a famous feat).

The airborne element of the invasion was always regarded as risky, (AVM Leigh-Mallory thought casualties might be as high as 80%). To ensure the success of the Operation, it was planned from the outset for



landing. After an afternoon's practice in these skills, which were carried out on the flat roof of the R.A.P. [Regimental Aid Post], we motored the few miles to Netheravon for the practical test. With the formation of RAF Dakota Squadrons, we conducted our first mass descent, and proved the usefulness of the new equipment.

Only a week or two later, exercise Bizz I. This time, the American Air Force flew us round Southern England, before heading towards France. (For this part of the trip we were escorted by fighter aircraft circling overhead.) Then it was back towards the drop zone. Red Verrey signal, exercise aborted. Next day, the weather was worse, and we didn't even get airborne. It was decided the exercise must proceed and we would go by truck. We were to seize a bridge outside Faringdon, and this involved a detachment swimming the river in the dark so that the bridge could be attacked from both sides at once.'

'During May 1944, the anti-tank batteries were issued with a new type of ammunition, known as 'Discarding Sabot'. [This is widely regarded as a post-war introduction, but apparently that impression is incorrect. This 'Sabot Ammo' was very much more effective against armour than the ammunition previously used. All the airborne batteries practiced for several days with this new ammo, which was soon to prove its effectiveness in earnest.- Ed]

### The Real Thing

Although the capture of the bridges over the Orne river and the Caen Canal is renowned as a brilliant achievement, it seems that the airborne anti-tank

artillery's possession of areas between the bridges and the German armoured formations has not been given the same prominence. Major Cramphorn apparently led a section consisting of detachments from several companies given the task of parachuting in as pathfinders, and clearing the anti-air landing poles from the designated landing zone, a few miles east of what became known as Pegasus and Horsa Bridges. This allowed the force of gliders to land safely in the dark with their anti-tank artillery, which then deployed to engage any enemy armoured attack from the east towards the bridges. Some doubt remains as to the exact date and time when the glider-landed batteries were reinforced by those that landed from the sea.

'6th June. (from Maj. Cramphorn's diary)

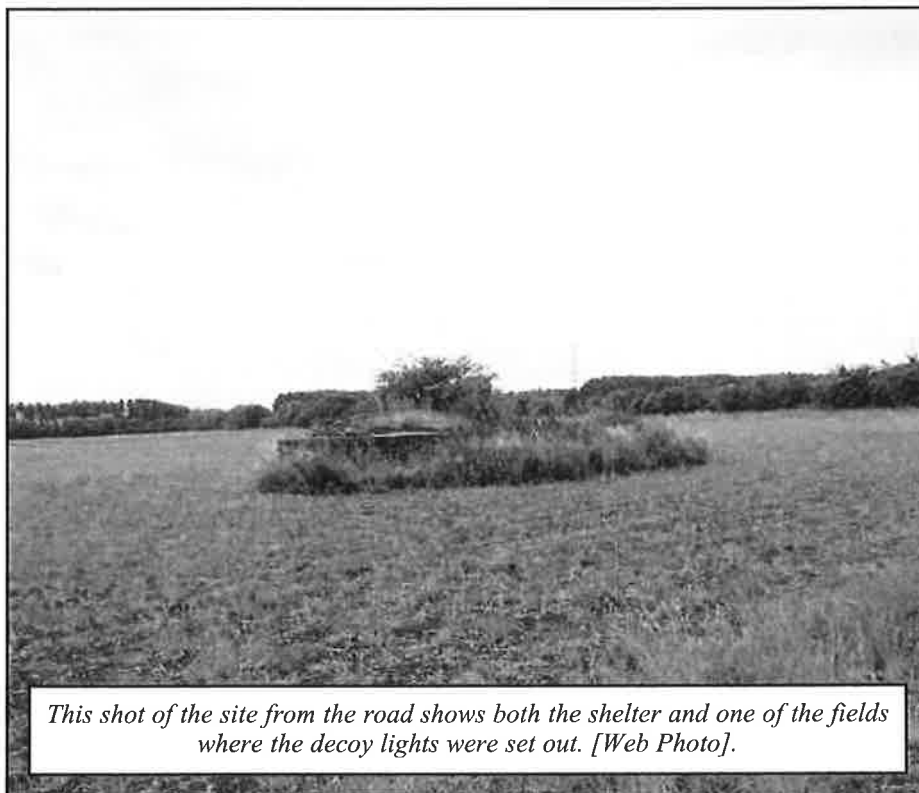
'After a reasonably accurate drop, we gathered, approximately 60 strong, with my Colour Sergeant, Harry Watkins doing a magnificent job getting the Company organised in the absence of the missing C.S.M. McParlan. The task proved easier than I had planned, for all the holes had been dug but many of the posts were simply put in place in the holes and not yet firmly secured. In many cases all we did was carry the pole away and fill in the hole. We finished the job with about 15 minutes to spare and having set up the markers, we were digging our funk holes when the gliders started to arrive. As a result we had a ring-side seat for the actual landings. Most of the Horsas made good landings and I was greatly impressed by the speed and efficiency shown by the passengers in unloading the jeeps and guns. Among the last to land was General Gale's glider, one of the few to make a really bad touch down just off the cleared path and as a result suffered damage from poles still standing. But I don't think he blamed us for that.

'Once we were sure that all the gliders had landed, we formed up to move down into Ranville and take up our defensive responsibilities. The expected attack occurred at 1300hrs the next day, and was driven back with several enemy self-propelled guns and at least one tank destroyed, along with a large number of infantry casualties.'

### From the Regimental history;

6th June. 0100hrs Para party in Albemarle aircraft from Harwell drops near Ranville. 0230hrs. 'A' Troop less 2 guns land near Ranville by glider.

**Continues Page 15**



*This shot of the site from the road shows both the shelter and one of the fields where the decoy lights were set out. [Web Photo].*

launched by Bomber Command during WW2. The commendation from his CO, Gp. Capt. Bennett, himself a renowned bomber pilot, and endorsed by the station commander, recounted Flight Sergeant Jefferies' participation in major raids against heavy opposition, including eight during the Battle of Berlin, and described his coolness and determination as an inspiration to his comrades. However, perhaps because of his disciplinary record, the AOC of 1 Group recommended a non-immediate award of the medal. Arthur Jefferies never lived to receive the award.

He had flown three more operations since Stuttgart, including one to Berlin. He died on what was to have been the penultimate raid of his tour, the infamous Nuremburg raid of 30th March 1944. The records show that his aircraft, Lancaster LM425, 'BQ-C' was the fourth bomber lost that night. Brought down by

flak over Liege in Belgium, the plane crashing at Gileppe. Only three crewmembers managed to escape by parachute to become POW's. Jefferies and the remaining crew perished in the crash and are buried in the Belgian war cemetery at Haverlec.

So it was his parents, George and Bertha, who eventually received the CGM from the AOC 1 Group, a reminder of their son's courage and outstanding ability. He represented the backbone of Bomber Command in the winter of 1943/44, and left a wealth of memories and sadness at North Killingholme. Ted Stones, a member of Jefferies' ground crew, recalled him as a man 'who didn't give a damn about authority, particularly that kind of pre-war regular air force pomposity that was seen even in place like Killingholme. It's a tragedy that he and so many others like him are no more.'



Arthur Jefferies (wearing cap) and most of his crew at Ludford Magna in 1943. Web Photo

**Page 13 continues**

1300hrs. Remainder of battery disembarks from LST's and assembles near Colville so as to rapidly take up positions at Ranville before the enemy has time to organise a counter attack against the bridges.

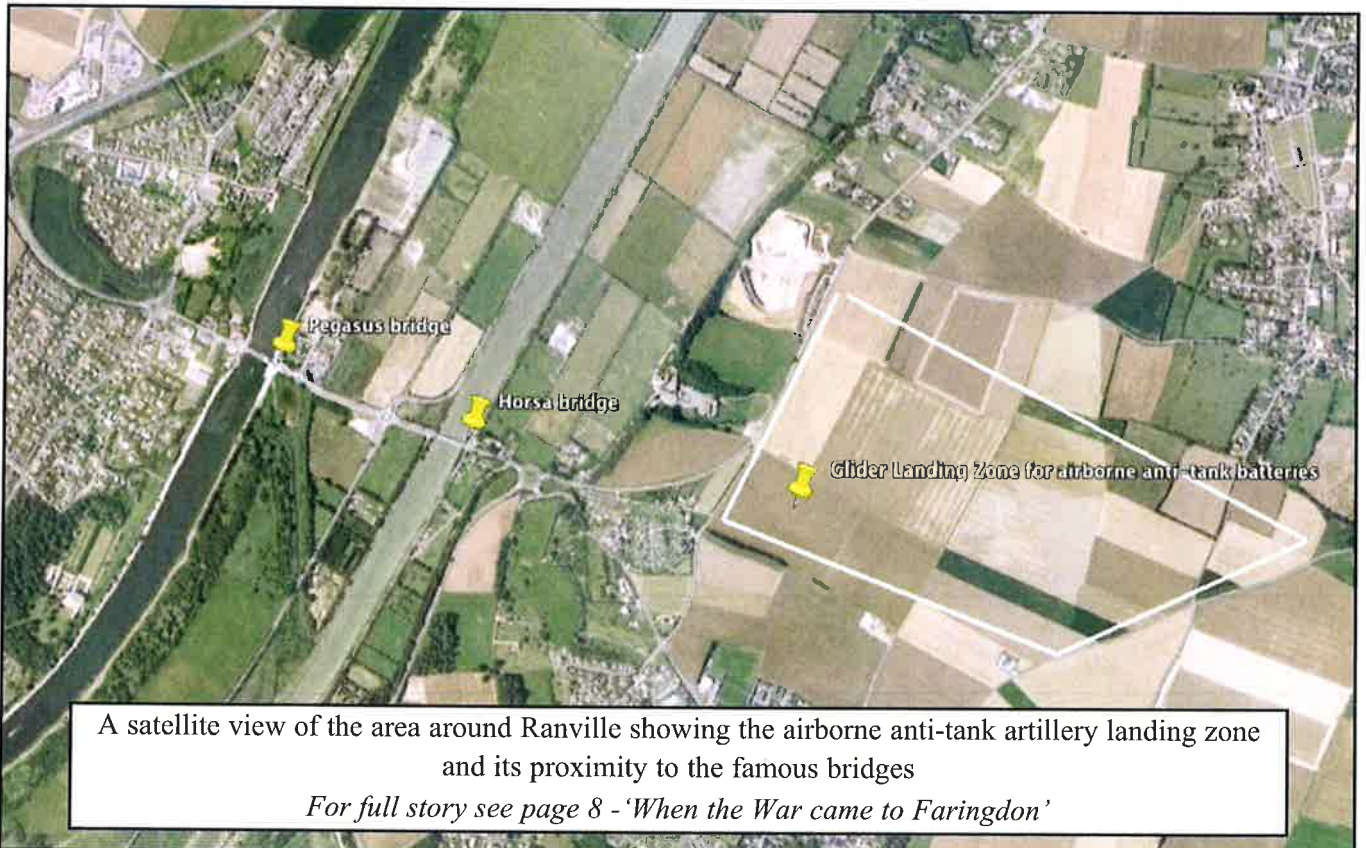
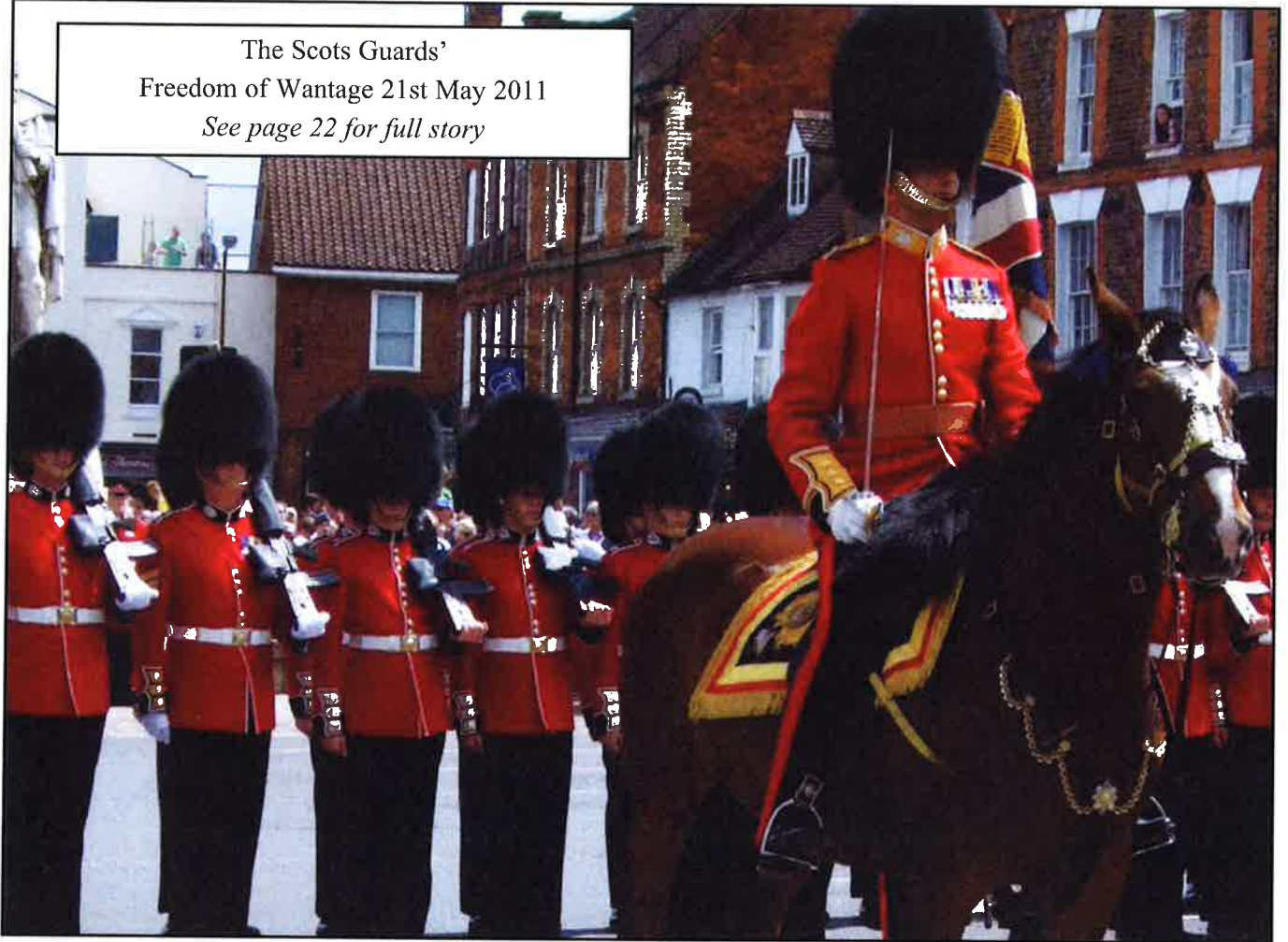
Tailpiece- A Secret Just Downriver

A few miles downstream from Radcot was a very hush-hush installation, close to the village of Buckland. In a field about a mile north-east of

Tadpole Bridge was an airfield 'Q' site. This is thought to have been a decoy for RAF Brize Norton. An enthusiast who visited the site in 2008 claimed that the depressions for the lights were still to be seen, and the area was extensively photographed at that time. Details and excellent photographs from that post-war exploratory visit can be seen on the website: <http://sites.google.com/site/derelictionintheshires/military-sites/tadpole-bridge-decoy-airfield>. Satellite images of the area show the position of the remaining building depicted in the photos.



The Scots Guards'  
Freedom of Wantage 21st May 2011  
*See page 22 for full story*



A satellite view of the area around Ranville showing the airborne anti-tank artillery landing zone and its proximity to the famous bridges

*For full story see page 8 - 'When the War came to Faringdon'*