

JOE BYRNES' STORY

Joe Byrnes was a schoolboy living in Lambourn when the American paratroopers arrived in the village.

A number of American soldiers were billeted in several locations in and around Lambourn including the stables at New Place, a large house in the centre of the village near the church. The men, who were from the 501st parachute Infantry Regiment lived in the stables as well as a number of Nissen huts erected in the grounds and Joe remembers that stable number one was the Sergeants billet. As with many schoolboys the soldiers were a source of great excitement and fascination for Joe and his friends and they quickly got to know a number of the friendly visitors very well. Joe became especially close to two paratroopers in particular, Private Hugh (Hughey) J. McFadden and T5 John McNally and came to regard them as true friends. The boys would run errands for the soldiers and in return they would receive sweets and other little luxuries that were hard to find in Britain at that time. The troopers were particularly fond of the local bread and the boys would fetch it for them daily. First thing in the morning they would take a bag - which had been manufactured from a scrap of barrage balloon material - down to the Bakers' shop at the bottom of Railway Road that was run by Mr. Drewitt. Later in the day they would collect it and deliver it back to the soldiers who would pay them for it, sometimes with cash and sometimes with American cigarettes and other goods. Joe remembers clearly that the soldiers would eat the bread with slices of tinned Pineapple from their kitchen stores.

The boys used to cycle up to Membury airfield and on one occasion, Joe and two friends - one of them an evacuee - were hanging around an aeroplane that was being loaded with mail sacks. After a while the boys fell into line and assisted with the loading and when the job was done one of the airmen asked them if they would like to go for a ride, promising them that he would have them back by four in the afternoon. After some initial apprehension the boys were helped aboard and took off on the ride of their young lives. Joe remembers that they sat on the mailbags and the crewman stood in the open doorway as they took off and flew over the villages below. After a short flight the aircraft landed at Greenham Common airfield and as the boys clambered down to the tarmac the airman said to one of the ground staff 'Hey, get these guys some chow' The boys were taken to the mess hall and were given a slap up meal with ice cream and the ever-present pineapple slices for dessert. They were flown back by four that afternoon as promised and for some time did not speak a word of their adventure to their parents for fear of getting into trouble. When some time later Joe ventured to tell what had happened that day no-one would believe him!

The paratroopers suddenly disappeared in May 1944 but before departing Hugh McFadden had given Joe an army diary with his family's address inside telling the boy that should they lose touch Joe could write to his family in America. For a little while everything went very quiet for the youngsters and it seemed that their big adventure had come to an end. After a number of weeks the men returned to Lambourn but both Hugh McFadden and John McNally were missing. To spare the boys feelings the surviving troopers told Joe that the two men had gone home and although disappointed Joe innocently accepted this news. It was not until some

time later that he was to discover with great sadness that McFadden had been killed in Normandy the day after D-Day on June 7th and McNally on June 11th. After the war Joe did correspond with McFadden's family for a number of years until they eventually lost touch.