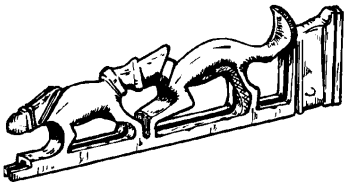
Ampthill & District Archaeological



& Local History Society

Boyhood Memories of WW 2 in Ampthill

John Winfield

www.adalhs.org.uk

John Winfield's Boyhood Memories.

John has lived in Ampthill all his life except for his military service including operations in Korea. He lived at 55, Dunstable Street during the Second World War and clearly remembers the movement of aircraft, troops and the changes the war brought about. Too young to fully realise the full implications it was seen as an exciting time and an opportunity to watch and sometimes join in some of the "adult games".
His memories were awakened at the "Bedfordshire at War Exhibition" held in the Parkside Hall Ampthill on 4th March 2000 organised by the Bedfordshire Local History Association. Looking at the ADALHS board he was heard to say "I saw that happen". He was reading a report of the Mosquito XVII HK304 from OTU Cranfield which crashed on Woodside Field, Flitwick off the Fordfield Road.
He was belatedly asked if he could let me have the details as he remembered them and he came up with a tape recording of his boyhood memories and that is the basis of this paper.

The Mosquito report was taken from PRO: Avia 23/5 and was of particular interest to me as the crash was observed by Leading Observer Earnest Woodland while on duty at the Observer Post (Mike 2) on Cooper's Hill, at 12.32 on 24.2.1945. He observed the plane circling round and noted the time and details of crash, as he saw it, in the record book. The crash investigating officer considered he had got the facts wrong and tried to get him to change his evidence, this he refused to do. The officer then became quite personal and accused Earnest of being obstinate and being a man of "restricted vocabulary and outlook". (Earnest had served in WW1 as an early volunteer at the Dardanelles, was later severely wounded and finished the war at Ampthill Camp where he played the violin to a high standard entertaining the hospitalised troops, hardly a restricted outlook).
John's recollection of the incident certainly seems to agree with Leading Observer Woodland's re. the direction the plane was flying and his position at the time in front of the Pine Laundry would have been almost in a direct line over the Observation post to the crash giving a similar view but it was a long time ago.
John and his friend Colin Gibbs, who was with him at the time, then jumped on their bicycles and rode to Flitwick only to be restricted to Fordfield Road by the police. They had stopped all but the emergency services from the field. The crash was being dealt with by the local firemen. He recalled some of their names, Len Bennett the shoe mender, Perce Woods who worked for the Gas Board, and Ron Swannell.

Observation Platform.

John was curious to know if anyone had recorded an observation platform built into a tree on the edge of Ampthill Park over the Woburn Road, he described it as approximately 20 feet above the road with iron pegs driven into the tree trunk as a

means of access. The platform was braced and safe but difficult to reach. It became a challenge for the schoolboys, which he took, but found it quite frightening to be so high. He queries what could be gained from the platform as vision was restricted by the trees especially when in leaf. (It is possible it was constructed at the outset of the war when desperate measures were taken e.g. ropes across roads to stop motorcyclists. Grenades or even petrol bombs could be dropped onto invading forces. It would have been a suicidal operation. - KF). He also pointed out that some of the older Home Guard men would find difficulty in getting up the tree.

Canadian Troops in Ampthill.

He recalled a group of Canadian Soldiers in bell tents by the football pitch in the Park. They played baseball, the first time John had come across the game. He found them very friendly and used to visit them after school asking for postage stamps. They allowed him to scour their waste bins for discarded envelopes. He still has the King George 6th War Stamps in his collection, a life-time hobby. The Canadians drove around in open back Jeeps, not the Ford-Willy type Jeep that he drove in Korea but a larger vehicle produced in Canada. One of the schoolboys asked if they could have a ride "Sure Buddy jump in". Then it took off at a fast rate with four boys on board and drove up between where the cricket pitch and the football pitch is now, over the top and down the "sledge run" and then back up Break-Heart Hill by the wood, along the top of the ridge and back to camp. "No health and safety rules in those days", the boys saw no fear and nor apparently did the driver, it was all fun.

Tanks on Test.

Sherman tanks were assembled in the workshops of the Stewartby Brickworks from CKD kits imported from America*. They were tested up Hazelwood Lane Hill, through the town, left towards Clophill and turning round in Gas-House Lane churning up the surface before returning to Stewartby. On occasions they clipped the kerb by the Town Pump causing damage and he remembers one occasion when a gun barrel went through Mr Grimmer's shop window. After that the granite set turning pad was constructed in Bedford Street.

Troop Build-up Before D-Day.

The schoolboys witnessed a build-up of troops and equipment in the park including artillery guns, search lights and bren-gun carriers. The lads were always around, interested in anything and everything. Inevitably one asked for a ride in a bren-gun carrier. Again four boys climbed on board and this vehicle which was very well sprung with caterpillar tracks, ran up the path track as the Jeep had previously, followed the ridge to Darkenins Wood, spun round in its own length and returned to base. It was a short but memorable trip for the lads to experience.
Bren-gun carriers and medium tanks, he thinks American Sherman's, carried out manoeuvres on Coopers Hill, churning up the sand leaving the whole area in a

terrible mess. As he said nature and time has healed the wounds and you can hardly see where they had been. He can however point out one area which has not recovered; it has a bank built up by numerous tanks turning in the same spot. One tank ran too close to the old sand-pit off Station Road and nearly turned over; the crew abandoned the tank and waited until a recovery vehicle managed to pull it upright. The boys watched this with great interest.
He remembers standing by the Alameda and watching Dakota aircraft towing what would have been Horsa gliders in preparation for D-Day although they were not aware of it at the time. The boys could all recognise aircraft, Dakotas, Wellingtons, and Lancasters etc. He also went to the Observer Corps Post (Mike 2) where Mr. Harry King would let him look through binoculars at the friendly aircraft. At a time, that must have been immediately before D-Day, he remembers the park, Alameda, the road to Kings Wood, in fact anywhere that could provide tree cover for camouflage, being full of troops and vehicles.

After D Day.

Suddenly they had all gone! He went into the park and found in the bushes a shovel that had been left behind, he still has it in his barn, perfectly serviceable but as he said not over used. He also found a lot of tent poles that had been left, his father said they would not be coming back for them so he took some home and they provided posts for a chicken run for a long time. Other debris included discarded petrol cans, unlike the robust cans carried on the vehicles these were light weight and square in section. A large dump of cans were left by Kings Wood and remained there for a long time.



Spigot mortar emplacement in the garden opposite the Alameda, just the top is visible at present. John remembers a similar emplacement near the Alameda Gates almost opposite.



Remains of an emplacement found when the Market Square

John is familiar with the reports on the ADALHS website and remembers the Nissen Huts and the Home Guard activities described. He saw the Spigot Mortar emplacements under construction near the Alameda gates and on the Market Square. He also saw men of the Home Guard struggling to carry the odd leg hairpin shaped tank barriers that were set in the roads. They were made from old railway lines and were very heavy. The rails were stored in an old Barn at the side of the road where St Andrews Close is today. There was also a number of old farm carts there which he believes were intended as temporary barricades if the enemy attacked: desperate measures.

*See report WW11 Defences of Ampthill www.adalhs.org.uk
Photographs K J Fadden.

Chairman's footnote.

John's accounts help to get a picture of war time Ampthill as seen by a child and also helps to confirm the archaeological findings of previous reports. I am reminded of my childhood in Clophill where my father was in the Home Guard, originally the Local Defence Volunteers (LDV). He carried a double barrelled 12 bore shot gun armed with special cartridges containing a single ball (it is questionable whether the barrels would have been able to withstand the pressure.) and was taught how to make Molotov cocktails (incendiary petrol bombs in glass bottles).

Kevan Fadden FSA.