

Fairford Flyer

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FAIRFORD HISTORY



SOCIETY

We hope you are enjoying these online newsletters. If anyone has anything they would like to contribute or any local history questions please email enquiry@fairfordhistory.org.uk. What about those Fairford memories?

A Schoolboy's Memories of RAF Fairford

Jim Jeffries had vivid memories of the wartime activities at RAF Fairford and 40 years later he committed his memories to paper. He lived and went to school in Whelford and the airfield was virtually at the bottom of his garden.

Throughout the winter, the Irish engineers worked hard for a very long hours, often in appalling weather and among them were men who were very cynical about the construction of the airfield. They were convinced that soon Britain would be forced into a making a desperate last ditch stand and it would be more sensible to be employed preparing for that day rather than build an airfield!

The village was rife with rumours about the airfield. Anything was possible. I had already seen Barracudas around and bi-planes towing Hotspurs gliders, and then one day when I arrived home from school, mother said "Look down the bottom of the garden. There was a mighty Stirling and we were awed by its colossal size, and shortly afterwards, on a Saturday afternoon, the Squadrons arrived in force and the airfield soon assumed an atmosphere of urgency.

Although at nights the local pubs, the Queens Head, Carriers Arms, the Plough and the Axe and Compass brimmed with the boisterous humour of the aircrews, they were not frivolous. As time was to prove, they were courageous men.

The following Saturday, the first of the Horsa gliders arrived and I watched as the first one was cast off from the Stirling tug. Momentarily it climbed a little and then the nose dropped and it streaked earthwards vertically in a manner more suitable for a dive bomber. Within 100 feet or so of the ground, it rounded out with flaps down, and dropped lazily on its wheels. It was a wonderful demonstration of the handling qualities of these all wooden military gliders which would soon be apparent.

Flying went on day and night and many a morning revealed evidence of remarkable pieces of flying having taken place while we slept.

In the darkness one night, a WACO glider had landed in an orchard owned by Mr Davys, and one night a glider struck our house a glancing blow. The pilots had found themselves so low they were forced to fly through the comparatively gap separating the pairs of houses to avoid stalling. As they went through, one wing tip took the guttering from one house and the drainpipe from our side, ploughing on to demolish a fowl house belonging to Mr Legg before coming to rest in our top garden. Eventually Mr Legg received the princely sum of £7 in compensation!

Nearly all the villagers undertook small bundles of washing and in this way we got to know many of the aircrew personally, and it was very sad when some of these young men failed to return and their laundry bundles remained unclaimed. One young officer had left his bicycle with us as well and the Air Force eventually picked it up.

Late one night, my Mother said to me 'Jim' she whispered "there's something up on the drome". I went to the window. In the blackness of the night the whole airfield was seething with action. Around the massive force of Stirlings and gliders was an ocean of parachutists and glider borne soldiers.

After a while she said "I think we are watching history being made. I think this is an invasion of Europe". Last week our dad said had said that all the armoured vehicles lining the roads through Pitham Bottom had gone, and Mrs Beams went up to the Radcliffe Infirmary the week before and she said the whole area around Carterton and Brize Norton had been thick with gliders.

After a pause, my Mother said "God, I hope they will be alright. Do you know Jim, its hell being a mother in war time? Every time my children go back off leave, I know it may be the last time that I will see them. But, what can you say to them...? All I keep thinking about is the small things I could have done for the, and didn't."



Close to midnight, the Stirlings began to fly out. There was no doubt that these men were taking part in one of the greatest actions of all time and it filled us with immense pride, and for the next two weeks the airfield was a hive of activity. As the Stirlings continued the dangerous task of ere-supply drops, yet, one by one the men called into collect their washing with news of those who would no longer be calling in. It was very sad.

With the invasion established and the activity slowing down, I was still able to keep the airfield under close scrutiny for developments and again instead of the oar of engines that accompanied the day and night flying the airfield fell silent.

Throughout the previous week men of the Airborne, wearing the proud flash of Pegasus - the winged horse - bitterly contested neighbouring road bridges and crossroads in fierce mock battles and now once again all was quiet but with bustling urgency. I saw motor cycles being placed in one Horsa and another being loaded with what looked like big radio transmitters. In Mother's words, "something was definitely up". Even the pubs had gone quiet as the airfield had been sealed off again. There were many rumours after a Wellington had made a spectacular 'wheels up' landing and later a Warwick had come in and that they were to replace the Stirlings. The arrival of a massive Hamilcar glider did nothing to dispel the rumours and then, in the middle of a night in September, the roar of engine woke us and we knew that something big was going on.

The next day we knew. It was an airborne assault on Arnhem and aircraft and gliders filled the sky and as the days went on, Arnhem was on everyone's lips and battle damaged Stirlings were very evident.

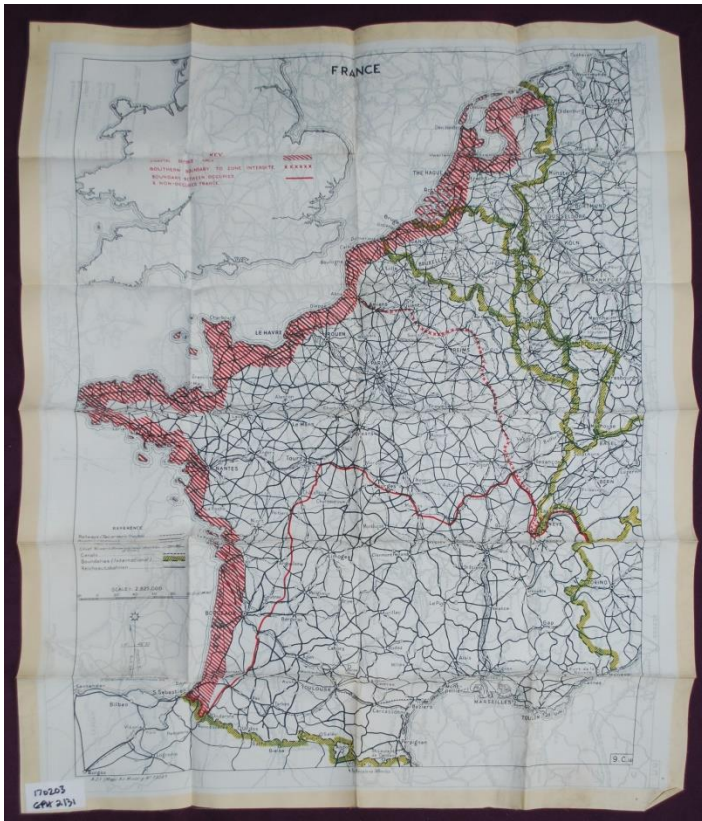
We heard broadcasts from news correspondents which lifted our hearts. 'This is Arnhem' and... how courageously the men at Arnhem were fighting and Arnhem was on everyone's tongue. It filled us with immense pride...but all was not going well. Watching the remaining aircraft, I was appalled at the damage that had been inflicted on them as they roared by 70 yards away. There were flames from burning engines streaming in the slipstream and we could feel the heat of each passing aeroplane, sharply pungent with the stench of burnt oil and spent cordite. Others dragged telephone wires behind them or were thickly covered with dense foliage so low that they had flown into the battle. One had a great area of flapping metal that looked as if it had been ripped open by a giant tin opener yet still they struggled back.

So real was the danger at our viewing spot that Mother got the children back out of the way and the younger ones out of bed and in the open as a precaution. After eight days the epic of Arnhem was

over. Twenty Stirlings of the Fairford Squadrons had not returned and in the end the War Correspondent broadcasting from Arnhem, before signing off made this statement.

“IF ANY MAN SAYS - I WAS AT ARNHEM, I WILL SURELY BUY HIM A PINT”

I am proud and privileged to have been able to make this contribution to the history of No 620 Squadron, Royal Air Force.



This scarf map was donated to June Lewis in 1986 from a glider pilot living in Vancouver, Canada, when she was researching her 'Cotswolds at War' book. It was issued to glider pilots in their 'escape kits' and is special as it was carried inside the pilot's smock on one of the D-Day and/or Arnhem operations from RAF Fairford.

An American in Fairford

During November 1944 my US Army regiment was in Fairford for over a month camped on the manor property at the head of the High Street where the school is now located.

In April-May 1995 Naseeb L Shory and his sons went on a whistle stop tour of Europe visiting places where he was stationed during the war. It was written up by his wife Mary Jo Shory.

'After a good night's rest they were off to Fairford. That was real nostalgia. The quiet village was almost unchanged after 50 years. It was still as lovely and as peaceful as it had been then. Even in 1944 Seebie (Naseeb) said the war seemed to be a million miles from Fairford. The Bull Hotel and Pub, the bakery and the chemist's shop were still in the same locations. They even found St Thomas of Canterbury Church where the GI's had attended Mass. The sentimental feelings were growing.'

During this visit they visited Hope's Newsagents in the High St and when they found that all the photos taken during this visit were lost, they wrote to the Hopes asking if they would take photos of the town and send them to them, which they did. They sent an account of their Europe visit in return - My Men and their Odyssey by Mary Jo Shory from which the quote above is taken. Liz Hope kindly lent this item to FHS.

Edwin Cuss has contributed his memories from World War 2

I was born in December 1940 and our house Five Elms in London Road was aligned north and south, and from the south side at night I remember my father pointing out the search light beams in

the sky, they were probably from RAF Fairford or farther away towards Swindon. This would have been in 1944.

In September 1944 I remember being taken in a push chair round to RAF Fairford to the Whelford /Fairford road area. I saw very big 4-engined aircraft taking off fairly quickly one behind each other etc. But continuing along behind each of these big aircraft was another aircraft without engines and it was connected to the other aircraft by what I thought as a small boy was a long piece of string. I now know these to be Stirling bombers towing Horsa gliders that were practising for the Arnhem landings.

At various times during the war we had evacuees and other people staying with us. A girl called Jose Norwood came and stayed with my Grampy and Granny, Mr and Mrs Ashford Farmer at 1 Eastbourne Terrace next to our house. Her smaller brother also came but my grandparents could only deal with one child so this boy Patrick Norwood stayed with us. He didn't stay for long because he was very homesick and missed his parents, Mr and Mrs Norwood who lived in Streatham in London. Mr Norwood was a London Fire Brigade chief and for many years after the war ended as a family we were invited to stay with them cost free as a thank you for looking after their children. I am still in touch with Jose to this day.

During 1945 at other times we had various American staff from the 186th US General Hospital up in the park with us for short stays. I remember Rev F W Rainwater, the chaplain at the US Hospital. He was from Kansas City and my father kept in touch with him for many years after. He always sent my sister Jenny and me Christmas presents such as American comics and books that I still have. Another couple that stayed with us for a short time was Sgt Giffkins and his wife. My great memory of them was that when I came home from the Infant School in London Road and on the table was a large tray of fudge which she had made for us. I expect the ingredients came from the US Hospital as all the ingredients for us were on ration. What a wonderful thank you gift. Imagine that for a five year old boy.

Finally, I started at the Infants School in September 1945. The war had ended but it was all present in the minds of the people. The school had an air raid shelter which was alongside the garden by London Road. We had to do air raid practises. The two teachers Miss Hayes and Miss Cox lined us up in the two classes in the playground where we were all where we all held hands in a long chain and then our teacher led us down the steps in the shelter along its length then out the steps at the other end. These practises did not seem necessary and were stopped after a time.

Note: by March 1947 the 'dug out' was first collapsed and finally filled in. Infant School Managers Minute Book

Peter Egerton has also sent his memories of VE Day

I was 10 years old on VE Day. My birthday was May 5th and people said the war will be over on your birthday but it lasted 3 more days.

People congregated in the Market Place and after the pubs closed there was community singing. We lived in Crabtree Villas (now Hatherop Road). When we went home people built a bonfire in the road. Teenagers went round the gardens at the back of the houses collecting firewood for the bonfire. They were bringing faggots of pea and bean sticks to burn on the bonfire and they were being applauded to fetch more. People weren't so happy the next day when it was realised what had been burnt.

After VE Day Lady Hirtzel provided a party for the school children in the Walnut Tree Field.

Grateful thanks to all the contributors for this issue, Syd Flatman sent Jim Jeffries' contribution, Liz Hope, Edwin Cuss and Peter Egerton.
