

A CHILDHOOD IN CHADDLEWORTH

by Eileen Barnes (nee Roberts)

“Life changed again when, suddenly, camouflaged lorries and jeeps drove through the village - the Yanks had arrived at Welford! We were soon used to seeing jeeps rushing around and the soldiers were very friendly to us all. It was quite common when the lorries went by to hear ‘Got any gum, chum’ from local children and packets of gum were thrown at us - I wasn’t too keen on Wrigley’s but loved the Dentyne when I managed to catch any. Being smaller than most of the others, I didn’t do too well!

Generally the GIs (‘Government issue’) were liked by villagers, although the local men had reservations. On Friday evenings, there was a whist drive and dance in the village hall. Early on, the older ones played whist followed by refreshments - cups of tea and cakes made from whatever could be found in various store cupboards. After the break, the music began (I think records were played but my memory is a bit hazy). All the single girls sat around the hall waiting to be asked to dance. Then the doors opened and in came the Americans. They taught the young ladies jitter-bugging and soon they were flying round the room - so much faster than the waltz or foxtrot. All the local lads could do was sit and wait. This was adding insult to injury as invariably the GI’s had drunk the local pub dry before coming to the dance, depriving the locals of their beer *and* dance partners. It wasn’t long before the local boys had had enough and the fighting began, the MP’s soon arrived and the GI’s were escorted back to base., only to return the following week for more of the same. What excitement!

Everyone was issued with gas masks and these had to be carried everywhere, school, church, and on visits to Newbury to do the shopping. Every Tuesday at school, Rev. Sheffield came to take assembly in the form of prayers and a hymn. He then checked our gas masks to make sure we knew how to wear them. They were awful and smelt of rubber. I couldn’t wait to take mine off.

Welford was just down the road from the school and on Fridays, we turned towards the base and sang ‘Stars and Stripes’ followed by our own National Anthem.

One Christmas, a big American lorry arrived to collect all the local children for a party. Some climbed in while the smaller ones were given a helping hand by the GI’s. When we arrived we were partnered by an American and soon we were feasting on tinned ham and peaches - I didn’t remember having either before. Then we had a film show, another treat followed by a visit from Father Christmas who gave each of us a toy for a present. It was a lovely occasion and most of us still remember it.

One day, we awoke to find lots of parachutes throughout the village, all colours, pinks, green, white, camouflage - some in trees, on banks and in fields. (*We know*

now that this was practicing for D-Day). A jeep drove round the village later, informing everyone by loudspeaker that it was an offence to take the parachutes, as they would be collected. Too late, a number had already found their ways to attics, sheds and other hideaways!

Then, one night soon after the parachute drop the loud hum of 'planes' was heard overhead soon after midnight and by morning all the Americans had gone. The village was quiet again and all the girls (and beer) were restored to the local lads".