

The Wychwoods at War What Did You Do in the War Daddy?

Like so many communities, the Wychwoods have been touched in many ways by the conflicts of the last 150 years. The earliest memory recorded in the magazine is that of 'A.A.M' sewing shirts for the soldiers fighting the Boer war in 1899. However the fears of war and invasion go back much earlier. In June 1980, the magazine reported on a document found by a Shipton resident about a meeting in May 1790 in the Crown Inn. 70 residents signed a declaration to form a Defence Association against our "ancient, implacable and unprincipled enemy, the French."

The Stories of Two World Wars

The Great War of 1914 affected communities throughout the country as typified by the War Memorials in every village. Each records a personal tragedy such as that of Tommy Hartley, buried in the village of Caumont in Normandy. It is poignant that Tommy, from a well known farming family in Oxfordshire, should find his final resting place in a peaceful farming community in western France. The second world war is closer to the memories of current inhabitants with exploits both on the field of battle and on the home front recorded in the magazine. One such hero was Pilot Officer Eddie Townsend, flying as wireless operator in a Hudson of Coastal Command over the Norwegian coast. The Hudson was engaged

in an epic battle with three Focke-Wolf 190s and the rear gunner was badly injured. Eddie, severely wounded from cannon shell and machine gun bullets, was able to repair the defunct radio and provide essential information to both the pilot and the ground medical staff on their return. Later the navigator said: "It was one of the

pluckiest things I've ever seen." Eddie is buried in Shipton churchyard.

Stand Firm

Not everything was a success. The Italian raid on the

Mediterranean fleet in Alexandria in 1941 resulted in the crippling of two of the larger battleships of the fleet. The attackers were captured and interrogated by Rob Long, later to become the first editor of *The Wychwood*. But this was serious stuff. Winston Churchill's leaflet on 'Beating the Invader' reminded Britain just how close to invasion they were. The two orders of the day were clear. If you are in the invasion area 'Stand Firm', elsewhere 'Carry On.' On the home front, the Wychwoods were fully involved. The Royal Observer Corps, based in a little wooden shack on the top of the hill on the road to Chipping Norton had the job of identifying hostile aircraft in the area. The Home Guard in the Shipton area was organised by Lord Latymer and drilled in his stable yard. Their role was to protect the key local installations such as Leafield Radio Station and Railway property. The responsibilities of the Milton platoon included guarding Rissington



aerodrome. The nightly roadblock was essential, but so was the wire and bell to the local pub which saved being out in the open all night! Others such as WAAF Pat Foster had operational roles in Coastal Command as a Met Officer, although providing transport for homing pigeons seemed to be also on the agenda. WRN Rachel Grant supported the MTBs operating out of Chatham before she was posted to Ceylon and New Delhi.

Land Girls and Bevan Boys

Of course the farming community in the Wychwoods played its part. Many past members of the Land Army remember their hard work with affection. Blisters were common place and one recorded incident involved a Land Girl removing her shoes and stockings and loading the corn barefoot, despite the stubble. Dorothy Treweeke remembers being tossed by a bull into the hedge, dangerous work! Other work was waiting for Peter MacKrill who registered for National service in 1943. He found himself one of the Bevan Boys, working down the mines to maintain essential coal production.

The dangers of war were never far away. Rose Burson remembered the bombing of Coventry in 1940 when the whole cottage in Fifield shook as the bombs fell. Robert Barrett witnessed at first hand the firebombing of Fairspear Farm in Leafield in 1942. The target was the Radio Station. In 1943 Milton became home to Italian Prisoners of War following their capture in

North Africa; the POW camp in Frog Lane later became a camp for Displaced Persons and remained so until the early 1960s.

Evacuees Who Stayed

The war affected families in other ways. Mary Barnes, (the mother of Doreen Barnes, our Publisher), was evacuated in 1939 and remained here, having been told she was going on a fortnight's holiday! Peter Whitehead and his family moved to Shipton Court Cottage where accommodation was rather cramped and tempers became frayed.

Finally it was over with VE Day followed a few months later by VJ Day - to the relief of all. But the war had laid the seeds for future conflicts when in 1948 the Russians blockaded Berlin. So began the Berlin Airlift and for a year the two million inhabitants of the Western sectors were supplied by British and US aircraft delivering over two million tons of food and supplies. This was remembered by 'RAF Lay-about (Retired)' 50 years later.



Helping the Heroes

In 1982, the local community was once again involved in warfare, with the Falklands conflict in the South Atlantic. Squadron Leader Nigel Beresford, from Milton, reported on the work of the RAF at Brize Norton flying supplies around the clock to Ascension Island, supporting the Task Force. Since then we have seen terrible wars in Bosnia, Iraq, the Gulf and Afghanistan. Sadly, 'Helping our Heroes' brings us right up to date.