

WORLD WAR II VISIT TO THE VILLAGE OF DAMERHAM



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For a short time in December of 1944 during World War II, Company B (less one platoon) of the 1318th Engineer Regiment of the United States Army was stationed in the village of Damerham. I was a captain from Alabama and commanded Company B. Other officers were Platoon Commanders, Lieutenants George Doll of New Jersey and Herman Simon of New York plus Administrative Officer Lieutenant Charles Owen of Alabama.

The enlisted men of the unit were quartered in the Village Hall while the Officers were billeted at Mr. Arthur Jerrard's Crossways Cottage across the road from the Hall and on the other side of the Allen River. The Officers occupied the top floor of the house which had an outside set of stairs. The Company supply was located in an outbuilding at Crossways Cottage.

Each day the men of the unit were trucked to the 250th Station Hospital of the U.S. Army which was located between Martin and Coombe Bissett on the Salisbury-Blandford road. At the hospital the men did general engineering work, mainly winterising tents. Lieutenant Alman Chandler's third platoon was stationed at the 228th Station Hospital of the

U.S. Army, located near Sherborne, and did engineering work for the hospital.

With my need to visit the work sites on a frequent basis and visit regimental headquarters at Hays House near East Knoyle, north of Shaftesbury, I was travelling a good bit during each day. After the work day the



officers and men of the unit became better acquainted with the people of the village as well as with those from the nearby farms. The pub at the Compasses Hotel was a favourite spot. It was one of my duties to see that no problems arose at public gathering places and to carry out my responsibility, I checked with the publican at the Compasses each week. My officers accused me of making my visits on the same day the publican received the pub's spirit ration, some in fruit (canning) jars no less. Also, when on pass, the enlisted men were trucked to nearby cities such as Salisbury.

The unit was well received by the people of the village. Charles Owen recalls that Dr. Alan Brown invited him and other officers to his residence for hot baths which were greatly appreciated. He also recalls attending the small Methodist Church on High Street.

Some of the officers enjoyed walks through the

village, observing the quaint homes, some with thatched roofs, and lovely gardens and finding them looking so peaceful and comfortable. When they chatted with the villagers they encountered on the walks, they found them to be very friendly.

During our coming and going from the upstairs at Crossways Cottage, almost daily we observed a gentleman meticulously attending a large black Morris automobile which was housed in the garage next to the stairs at the cottage. We felt for him as he showed so much interest in the car and yet he could not drive it

due to the petrol shortage. The gentleman was Colonel Hubert Burke who was retired from the British Army. Colonel Burke resided at Crossways House which was across the road from Crossways Cottage.

One day Colonel Burke extended me a rather formal invitation: Would the OIC and one of his Lieutenants join him and Mrs. Burke for tea at 4:30 on Saturday afternoon? Mrs. Jane Burke worked at NAAFI (Navy, Army and Air Force Institute) HQ in Salisbury and only got home on the weekends. Because the British had limited supplies available to them, we had been cautioned about accepting their hospitality. Lieutenant Owen and I did accept but we carried a gift of some of our rations. The Burkes were gracious hosts and we had a enjoyable afternoon discussing, among other things, the peace that seemed to be near. The date was December 16th. Little did we know that that morning the Germans had launched a counteroffensive which was to become the Battle of the Bulge. The next day I celebrated my 24th birthday. For a birthday breakfast, I had a rare treat: fresh eggs which were courtesy of Alec, a local farmer who had a dog named Lucy.

In mid December the men of the company started to save some of their rations, candy, gum, etc. in order to have a Christmas party for the children of the village. Preparations were moving on at full speed, but just before Christmas the unit received orders to move to Membury Airdrome near Swindon with a mission to dismantle portable hangers for shipment to the Continent. Company B of the 1318th Engineers moved out of Damerham on Christmas Eve 1944. C'est la guerre.