



The Military at Bridestowe – WWII

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Note to readers:

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Although a few men had been called up at the beginning of hostilities the war hadn't impinged too much on Bridestowe until the aftermath of the evacuation from Dunkirk at the beginning of June 1940. In the chaos that ensued men from various units were landed at ports all along the south coast. Various places were chosen as centres for regiments to gather together the remnants of their men. Bridestowe was chosen as the place where the Middlesex Regiment gathered.

At least three Battalions had been in France and the survivors straggled in over the next few days. The men came straight from the field of battle and desperately needed clothing, feeding and somewhere to rest. Buildings like the Parish Hall, the Cricket Pavilion and the Reading Room were commandeered and fitted with bunks. A cookhouse was built adjacent to the Chapel School Room and showers were fitted in the Chapel Garages. Eventually a nucleus of each battalion moved to more permanent quarters at Corfe Castle, Poole and Holyhead.

Searchlights were installed at Little Cranford and at Close Hill to help combat the threat, especially to Plymouth, from German bombers. As the threat of immediate invasion receded the army had to be rebuilt with the eventual aim of returning to mainland Europe. New, extra facilities were needed and an Infantry Training Camp was built at Leawood, a Military Hospital established at Millaton and an Ordnance Depot centred on Bridestowe Station.

Three fields along Station Road from Leawood Lodge to Ashleigh were transformed from meadowland into a hutted camp, Millaton House along with extra temporary buildings became a hospital staffed by the R.A.M.C. A new, ramped entrance was constructed into the Blackabroom field next to the station and this hutted camp was home to the R.A.O.C. Every space sheltered by trees between the Fox and Hounds and the top of Beara Hill became a vast ammunition dump, the boxes covered by mini corrugated shelters. Among units stationed at Leawood were the Warwickshire Regiment, the Lancashire Fusiliers and the Welsh Guards. Traffic through the village increased dramatically. The unstable, tracked bren gun carriers were a constant source of noise and excitement to young children.

When the United States entered the war and G.I.s began arriving in this country, British troops moved east, because they would eventually embark to attack the eastern beaches in Normandy, leaving the west country to the Americans. The 116th Infantry Regiment sailed to this country aboard the Queen Mary. The 2nd Battalion, comprising E,F,G and H Companies arrived at Leawood in early 1943. They trained initially on Dartmoor, which most hated, then at Woolacombe for the amphibious landings.

Although the Americans had more money and more food than the locals they were generally welcomed, especially by the publicans and some farmers who prospered by their custom. Women often did washing and ironing for the officers. Children were particularly glad because it was a custom for troops to throw chewing gum and sweets from the trucks as they passed by. At Christmas 1943 the village children were invited to a party at the camp where the amount and variety of food and fruit available was amazing to us who were used to rationing.



Locals were invited to attend concerts for the troops in the Parish Hall. The most notable performers were Bob Hope and Frances Langford who appeared on 14th July 1943. Unsubstantiated rumours also mentioned a meeting in the village between Montgomery and Eisenhower.

Millaton became an American manned hospital. Soldiers could sometimes be seen playing baseball on the cricket field. The ammunition dumps were maintained and guarded by U.S. troops, mainly black soldiers. The Americans also had a rudimentary airstrip beside the A30 at Stone where small reconnaissance planes, which we called flying jeeps, took off and landed. They were probably Taylorcraft Grasshoppers.

Most Americans, whether driving Jeeps, lorries or half-tracks seemed to be intent on breaking some imaginary speed record. One such speeding tank transporter coming from Cornwall entered the blacked-out village at night, failed to negotiate the old hump-back bridge, glanced along the cottages on the right before crossing the road and demolishing part of a cottage and the archway into the churchyard. Such was the machinery available to the Americans that the road was soon reopened, although it was several years before the arch was re-instated.

An open road was vital because by this time convoys of tanks in particular were making their way to embarkation points in Cornwall. When one broke down outside the Retreat engineers were soon on hand to crane out the defective engine and replace it with a completely new one. The Infantry left Bridestowe on 15th April 1944 in preparation for D Day. On 6th June E, F and G companies were in the first wave of landings on Omaha Beach and took heavy casualties.

For a while Leawood was empty, but soon a barbed wire compound was built in the top field which was occupied by Italian prisoners of war. Sometime after D Day they were replaced by German soldiers. The camp only held low risk prisoners. Many worked on local farms during the week. On Sunday afternoons they were allowed to take a circular walk through the lanes, accompanied by a single armed soldier, which usually included a stop on West Bridge to watch the world go by. Some were talented artists and craftsmen. The interior of huts were often decorated with beautiful murals and inside the compound several exquisite wooden models stood close to the barbed wire.

At Christmas 1944 every child in the village received a wooden toy made by the prisoners. After the American troops left the village the hospital and the ordnance depot became redundant. Millaton returned to the Carringtons although they never lived there again. Apart from a couple huts left for the farmer's use the site at Blackabroom was returned to meadow. Most of the huts at Leawood were auctioned off, but because of the amount of roads, drainage and concrete hut bases the site was left derelict. It was suggested as a suitable place to build houses, but in the event was eventually planted with conifers.

After the passing of seventy years little remains to be seen of those six momentous years. The main entrance to the camp is still there opposite Standon lane. The guardroom was on the right, the lorry park and workshops on the left. The ramp into the Ordnance camp below the station is still there,



now a field entrance. When you next park your car to walk the Granite Way look at all those gaps in the hedges on both sides of the road. They were once entrances to the dumps of ammunition.

Source: Howard Barkell March 2015

David Travers, was telling me all about when the American GIs were stationed here during the war, he thinks they arrived in 1942 and were here around 18 months. He remembers their arrival with them marching down Exeter Rd into town, unannounced and scaring the kids who thought they were German! He remembers their camp up the old showfield, their friendliness and how they gave the kids sweets and shiny comics. He says one Christmas they put on a show out at their Bridestowe camp for kids whose fathers were either dead or abroad fighting, they were served a Christmas dinner and saw a film show, Charlie McCarthy and Edgar Bergen. The GIs were friendly and welcomed, he says, until one day they'd all just gone. Moved out overnight and the camp was deserted.