

A Bottisham Soldier

George Osbourn - born 1914

This is a story of George who lived in a fen-edge village. During the second World War he was called-up and, for the first time, experienced travel beyond his familiar surroundings.

George Osbourn lived in the same house in Bottisham until he moved to a retirement home in 1996. His Great-grandfather had bought the house in 1880, when it was three houses with the pub in the middle - 'The Queens Head'. It remained a licensed premise until closed for selling intoxicating liquor on 21st January 1965; at that time the licence was in the name of William James Osbourn. Another family connection with the trade was George's great-grandmother the licensee (granted in 1899) at the Bell. School was not the happiest time in George's life. He attended the Church School, Bottisham. The school philosophy was - 'if I can't teach you any other way, I'll knock it in'; boys and girls would get a crack on the head to confirm the threat! All ages were in the same room. George claims that even the teachers were afraid of the headmaster who taught at one end of the room. To his great relief George finished schooling, at 14 years of age, to enter the family building trade.

George claims that he, unlike his brother, did not join the Home Guard until he had to. He also claims that most of the time was "a big laugh". When the 'Runner' (Percy Cullum) told George to collect his uniform from the room at the back of the, then, Reading Room, George flatly refused to accept used clothing, and especially shoes, handed in by former owners: an attitude he carried throughout the Second World War. On one famous occasion when in training, the drill instructor shouted "Gas!".

The Home Guard platoon all started messing about because they thought the instructor meant "Talk". That 'fixing bayonets' was a hazardous movement was confirmed when major family rows resulted when Home Guard members tried the exercise at home - one shot a hole in the ceiling of The Swan Inn!

In 1942, call-up papers, and a travel warrant, arrived for George at the Queens Head. Somewhat naively he walked to the rail station at Lode to "see a bloke, Jim Baird" and ask about the time of the trains. He was told, much to his shock, that he was to go on the next train! Bill Nurse and Albert Rank were also waiting for the train. The train arrived eventually at Bishop's Stortford, George having changed at Audley End, and was met by a lorry and he was deposited at a farmyard at Wimbush. Not surprisingly George, having arrived early, was not expected and only a limited kit was handed out. He slept well the first night, whilst men arrived all through the night. It is clear from George's story, that from his arrival at the farm, until his final demobilisation, he was determined not to take army life too seriously and to "make the most of it"! Next he went to Northampton where "a bit of training involved jumping over cattle pens". Now, a fully trained soldier, George found himself in the Royal Service Corps!

First, by convoy to Tripoli where he arrived too late to join the convoy for the invasion of Sicily. George's Corps waited for the Canadians to arrive and then they set sail for invasion at Salerno. When he arrived off-shore it was nightfall and too dangerous to wait because of possible bombing. So, George was returned to Tripoli via Malta. From North Africa the next place of disembarkation was Taranto. Luck held!

. Never refusing a request to volunteer, the years until demobilisation (on B release!) in 1946, were spent criss-crossing

Italy from South to North. George well remembers Taranto, Bari, Baretta, Pompei, The Riviera via Genoa, and sneaking on a Royal Service Corps ferry boat to Marks Square, Venice. George's story is told in the manner of a Saga holiday excursion. He seemed quite put out because he could only find one bridge not blown up to enter Florence where he "had a good look round" and found "a nice big canteen stocked by the American Army"! George appears to remain upset that a dental appointment stopped his visit to the Tower at Pisa. All his kit, and presents sent from home, were stolen from his camp near Naples; the loss was taken in his stride. The driver of George's truck was bent on getting to Rome, so he left the road convoy and they made their own way and (George claims) were the first British to arrive in the city. The Bottisham lad was cheered all the way through Rome, until "an old people's home was found as a billet" To cut a long story short, the last billet was in Milan where George spent time in a factory canteen, suitably adjacent to the trams, so that he could have another "good look round"! It is not clear how he spent time in Yugoslavia, but it comes into his story.

What is really interesting about George is that he was a young man who had lived in a village but was determined to make the most of any war situation he was in. He claims that many a time he laughed until he cried. Asked by the Sergeant-Major if he would stay in the army after the war, George said ".....not likely, once I'm out of here you won't see me again".