



The snowdrops of Camp Cromore

The living memory of the American 82nd Airborne Division's stay in Portstewart in the Winter of 1944

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A WWII Pill Box still sits at the far end of Portstewart Strand, testimony to a more uncertain time in our town's history. Sands of time have quite literally enveloped its structure with only one embrasure still peering back across the beach to the town.

I am quite certain that many of the visitors who make the 2-mile trek to the end of the beach would not be aware of the significance of this structure or indeed the role our town played during that most

pivotal period of recent history. Indeed, as a resident of this town for over 50 years, it came as a surprise to realise, relatively recently, that Portstewart had hosted an American regiment who spearheaded the largest invasion ever known to mankind. In this article I attempt to explore the living memory in Portstewart of the American 82nd Airborne Division.

It is now over seventy years since a train pulled up at a little station on the outskirts of Portstewart, a small seaside town on the North West coast of Ireland. This train carried the men of 508th Parachute Regiment who were to be billeted on Cromore Estate, only a short walk from the station. Whilst trains do not stop at Cromore Station anymore, the structure still exists having been sympathetically converted into a courtyard complex of apartments.

Cromore Estate has not changed that much over the past seven decades. The house itself is now a residential home and some of the out buildings have been converted to stylish apartments. During the war it was owned by the Montagu family. According to a local resident, Mrs Joan Kerr, Lady Montagu was apparently mortified by the loss of her snowdrops that resulted from digging of foundations for the Nissan huts, the temporary homes for many of the soldiers.

The town of Portstewart is less than half-a-mile walk from the gates of Cromore Estate. Today it is still very much the residential seaside town it would have been when the American GI's were stationed here, with a large retirement population, many in their eighties and nineties. I was therefore hopeful of tapping into the living memory of the war years. My optimism was rewarded by the discovery of three remarkable ladies - remarkable, not just for their ability to recall very fine details of this period, but for their good health, appearance and humour.

Audrey and Lily Hamilton worked with their mother in the post office in Portstewart during the war. Her mum helped run a soup kitchen in the middle of the town (now a church hall). Her mum also helped organise dances for the troops in the local Town Hall. Indeed, there was a rumour that Glen Miller himself had made a surprise appearance at one of these dances back in those days.

When I asked Audrey could she remember any names of the soldiers, she did recall a gentleman by the name of Mathias who came to visit her at her mother's home on the Coleraine Road in the town.

They had danced together the previous night and Audrey had got a lovely surprise when he arrived at her family home the next day with a box of chocolates. Audrey's mother invited the caller in and then to stay for dinner. He initially politely refused explaining that his regiment were under strict instructions not to accept rationed food from the locals. However, Mrs Hamilton insisted and the soldier gladly accepted.

I did a bit of research into the name Mathias and was surprised by what it turned up. This Mathias turned out to be none other than Lt Robert P Mathias who has been documented as being the first American officer to have died on D-Day. His story is one of tremendous bravery, telling of how the young lieutenant led Second Platoon, E Company, into battle that fateful night in June 1944...

'Mathias saw the red light go on. "Stand up and hook up!" Mathias called out. With machine gun bullets tearing through the aircraft the men behind Mathias called out "Let's go!" But it was Mathias' duty to wait, to keep his hands on the outside of the doorway, ready to propel himself into the night the instant the green light went on.'

Then suddenly, a shell went off beside him. Red-hot flack ripped into his reserve chute and into his chest. It knocked him off his feet. With all his strength, he began to pull himself back up. Then the green light went on.

With blood streaming from his body, Mathias raised his right arm, and called out, "Follow me!" and leaped into the night." (source: http://508pir.org/history/follow_me.htm)

Lt Mathias body was discovered the following day, his parachute still strapped to his body. Had he stayed on the plane, Lt Mathias may well have received the medical attention he required and have survived. Had he hesitated that night and not shown leadership, his troop may well have perished in the confusion. Such is the dilemma of a true hero.

To confirm that this was indeed Lt Robert Mathias I contacted Dick O'Donnell, the Chairman for Family and Friends of the 508th PIR Association. Dick was able to uncover shipping records which indicated that Lt Mathias was indeed on the boat destined for embarkation at Belfast in early January 1944. I also visited Audrey Hamilton again to show her what I had discovered about Lt Mathias. She was able to confirm his identity from a rather grainy photograph included on his biography posted on the 508th PIR website (www.508pir.org/co_pix/off/off_m1.htm). Audrey recalled his towering strength and lean build. All of this tallied with a man who by all accounts was prepared both physically and mentally for the immense challenge ahead of him.

Audrey told me that Lt Mathias returned to her mother's home on several other occasions for dinner and they had attended church together. She recalls them both going for a walk along the sea path that leads to Portstewart Strand. Audrey remembers her mother receiving a nicely worded thank you letter from the young lieutenant not long after his regiment left the town.

I was a bit reticent about revisiting Audrey to inform her of the fate of the kindly American who had obviously made such a favourable impression with her family. However, she was very appreciative of the information on Lt Mathias. I suppose she was honoured to have meet him and that her family had shown kindness to such fine and remarkable a hero as Lieutenant Robert P Mathias.

Miss Irene Burke still lives today a stone's throw from the location of the Central Café her father and mother ran during the war years. This café, like others on Portstewart Promenade, would have had a spectacular view looking out over the Atlantic Ocean and across to Donegal's Inishowen peninsula. It was a place for the soldiers to meet and relax. Irene recalls how on many occasions the Americans would simply rent a table and order a jug of water and some glasses. However, the soldiers were fond of their food and Irene remembers there always seemed to be a plentiful supply of meat when the American's were in town. Where it came from, no one knew, and there were no questions asked. People were just glad to have a change from corned beef!



A favourite with the Americans was what became known as a BBC (Burger, Beans and Chips). Irene recalls the local butcher coming into the café with a huge bag of mince for burgers. Her mother was mortified, concerned that if found out by the authorities, their business would have been brought to a speedy end. Luckily for her Mum she had just purchased a new steel bin that morning, still unused, which she put to good use in concealing the meat.

She also recalls the American's asking could they host a party at the Café. When her father pointed out that there was a shortage of food – the soldiers returned an hour or so later with a batch of freshly killed chickens, and the party was on again. Irene always remembers the chickens where as white a snow and how, when her mother asked the GI's why they came to be so white, she was told that they had washed them using 'Omo' – washing powder! The chicken still tasted great.

Irene tells the story of her father's concern regarding how the less scrupulous local establishments were taking advantage of the soldier's lack of knowledge on the value of the local currency. It was not uncommon for many of the soldiers to have spent their monthly earnings within a couple of weeks. Her father often accepted signed bills as IOUs. In an attempt to correct this injustice, he set up a series of evening classes in the café after closing hours to inform the GI's regarding the value of the national currency and other useful local knowledge.

Irene recalls how the Americans were so finely dressed and how this made a big impression on the local female population. She still remembers the soldiers marching up the Portstewart's promenade and how they would smile and whistle at the girls as they did so. It was always hard to tell if they were keeping time because they all wore rubber soles. It didn't matter – the ladies all fell in love with them.

Irene described the impact the American's had on the town and its population. Portstewart in those days would not have been used to so many foreign visitors with such a different and fresh approach to life. In a way this gentle invasion had opened up their eyes to new possibilities and ways of thinking about things. I get a strong sense from talking to Irene, that there was a great fondness for the American soldiers stationed in Portstewart during the war. I also get a great sense of loss when Irene describes how one day the town woke up to find all the Americans had upped and left in the middle of the night. It was all top secret so no one had any warning of their departure. She recalls a very eerie atmosphere in the town. Nothing was left – they had burnt all traces that they had been there in the first place.

Irene recalls that morning very clearly and how her father stared at the signed bills which the Americans had left unpaid from the previous week or so. He gave a wry smile and said "We will just have to put this down to experience". In reality her father was sad to see the Americans go and like so many other locals would miss the vitality and colour they had brought to the town.

However, with regards the unpaid bills – there was no need for concern. An American Officer, who I am reliably informed was most likely 1st Lt. Harry C. Bailey, returned to the town some days later and paid for all the signed bills in each of Portstewart's eating and drinking establishments. America's Greatest Generation had left our small seaside town with the dignity and honour of their memory firmly intact.

I returned to Cromore Estate a few days ago to take some photographs for inclusion in this article. Recalling Lady Montagu's concern for her ravaged wildflower garden, I took a pot of snowdrops with me thinking they would look very appropriate in front of the monument dedicated to the men of 82nd Airborne Division. Snowdrops and poppies share a similar symbolism. The poppy is used as a symbol of remembrance and of hope because it was one of the first flowers to appear on the scorched earth of the World War I landscapes. Similarly, the snowdrop is one of the first flowers to appear at the end of winter. It too could be seen as a symbol of hope and of brighter days to come.

When I arrived at Cromore I could not believe my eyes. The grounds around the house, including the memorial, were peppered with large clusters of snowdrops basking peacefully in the late winter sunshine. The snowdrops of Camp Cromore have returned to grace the grounds where heroes once trod.

(Paddy McLaughlin January 2017)

