



The Hut at Aldbourne

Band of Brothers Billet

The Band of Brothers billet, a dilapidated Wiltshire stable block, is to be demolished and re-erected in the USA as a museum, reports Graham Tibbetts

Today it is little more than a dilapidated wooden skeleton, inhabited only by the ghosts of bygone heroes. But 60 years ago this ramshackle stableblock bustled with life, the closest thing to home for American paratroopers preparing to do battle in the fields of Normandy.

Situated in Aldbourne, Wiltshire, the billets housed Easy Company - whose exploits were chronicled in the book and television series Band of Brothers - during 1944.

In the build-up to Operation Overlord the soldiers practised their manoeuvres at nightfall in the surrounding countryside, or relieved the tension drinking and dancing with the locals.

Then, after fighting in the immediate aftermath of invasion, the unit returned to the village to regroup and steel itself for the trials ahead in Arnhem and Belgium.

Only one stable block remains of the camp that housed the companies of the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment. That too was about to disappear until a £60,000 plan was proposed to dismantle the six surviving stables and transport them to Toccoa, Georgia, where the regiment was formed in 1942.

There the timbers will be reassembled as part of a museum to commemorate the 506th's role in the liberation of Europe.

Major Dick Winters, who led Easy Company for much of the campaign, welcomed the project and recalled the time spent in Aldbourne with fondness.

"It seems like only yesterday. My memories are very warm; Aldbourne, to me, is the warmest place we ever camped or could call 'home'.

"It wasn't just the atmosphere of the village but the people - they made it a home," said Major Winters, 84, who was played in the television series by Damian Lewis.

As an officer he was billeted with a family, while the ranks slept four to a stable. "The men loved the stables because they could hide from the officers," he said.

"It was dark inside and they could pull their blankets over their head and make it look like part of the mattress. The officer inspecting wouldn't be able to spot them".

"My job was to root them out and inspect them. Another trick they had was to hide behind the clothes that were usually drying along the wall," said Major Winters, who now lives in Hershey, Pennsylvania. "When some of the wounded men returned from Normandy early, they were moved into the stables and had wonderful memories of them. They had their own privacy and in the army that is the most precious thing you can have."

The paratroopers arrived in Aldbourne in September 1943, after basic training in Georgia. Exercises in the English countryside allowed them to become familiar with the lanes and hedgerows they would encounter in occupied Europe.

On June 6 1944 the soldiers were dropped just behind Utah beach and knocked out four 104mm German guns that had been spreading a deadly barrage across the sands.

After 10 days of fierce fighting Easy Company, having suffered severe casualties, was sent back to the stables of Aldbourne to recover.

In September the men returned to action as part of Operation Market Garden - the ill-fated Bridge Too Far - where they were again in the thick of the action. The soldiers never returned to their Wiltshire sanctuary, but continued to fight their way across Europe in the Battle of the Bulge, their march ending only when they captured Hitler's mountain retreat, the Eagle's Nest, in Berchtesgaden.

Sergeant. Paul Rogers, now 85, was one of just a handful of men who survived from Toccoa through to VE Day. He made a pilgrimage to Aldbourne last year and was able to locate his old quarters.

"The memories all came flooding back for me. It's a village I will never forget," said Sergeant. Rogers, who lives in Kansas City. "If a guy was working on KP (kitchen patrol) he would try and get extra fruit, like a can of peaches, and hide it in the mangers in the stables for the rest of us.

"I also remember the little pub and tea and crumpet places in the village. We would go to the taverns and drink our warm beer.

"We felt at home there, we really did. People were real nice to us. We would have a dance once in a while and do the boomsadaisy."

Sergeant. Rogers, who will visit Normandy next month for the 60th anniversary events, added: "I think the local people knew when we were leaving for the first time because they all looked kind of sad."

The surviving stables are to be saved in memory of their wartime occupants by Keith Sowerby, a local furniture maker. "The Georgians, on hearing that they were going to be demolished by the owner, asked if I would make inquiries on their behalf as to whether he would give the stables to the Americans. He said 'sure'.

"They are organising a site in Toccoa which will form the central exhibit of a museum dedicated to the men of Easy Company," he said.

With the help of his son and two colleagues, Mr .Sowerby, 68, is dismantling the stables and numbering every piece. They will then be transported to Toccoa and re-assembled.

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