

# Toy Soldiers

by Peter Neville

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

It may be truthfully said that certain boys in Pomphlett did more damage to the American war effort in the Plymouth area than the German bombers did, unintentionally, of course. One of those boys just had to be Reggie, accompanied by his friends, the Potter twins and Jimmy Vosper, three notorious mischief-makers. One such incident happened thus:

About three days after the last air raid the four boys were down at the creek looking to see what they could find or scrounge from the Americans' barge building shipyard, when they came upon a landing barge that was ready to go on trials. Temptingly, it sat on a slipway, half in and half out of the water, and there was not one Seabee in sight. The men had taken another barge and had gone for lunch to their encampment across the Cattewater, at a place not far from Corporation Wharf. Now was an ideal half-hour or so for the four boys to hunt for souvenirs, or more importantly, items that could be used at home. Even the Seebeas' seawater soap was not safe from their pilfering. Bars of seawater soap could always be found where the Seabees were working on the landing barges, getting their hands dirty from rust and grease and using the soap with which to wash them in the salt waters of the creek. The soap worked best in salt water, but Florence made use of a bar or two on Mondays when she did the family clothes washing. No lather could be made from the soap, but it got the boys' clothing clean and was better than having to spend her precious pennies on laundry washing powder.

Climbing up onto the lone landing barge, the four were playing around on the stern when one of the Potter twins, toying with the control knobs on the panel, suddenly started an engine.

"Stick it in gear," suggested Jimmy Vosper.

"I don't know how to," came back the answer.

"I think you press that one, or maybe pull on this thing," said Reggie, pointing to the assortment of controls on a panel.

"Try it," said one of the Potter boys. "If you can get this thing going, we can go for a ride."

"I'll push this one," said Jimmy. He chose correctly. The engine's gearbox slipped into full astern, and the barge, lurching at first on the wooden slipway, slid into the water, where, immediately on being fully afloat, it surged astern, the engine revving at its maximum.

"How do you stop this thing?" Jimmy was shouting, when the Morley Arms pub's sea wall just

happened to get in their way and abruptly stopped the landing craft with an awfully loud and grinding crunch.

“We’ve probably only scratched the paint,” said Reggie.

“Yeh! But we’ve knocked a huge hunk of rock from off the wall,” said Jimmy.

“I think that one’s a forward gear,” said one of the Potter boys. “Try it, Jimmy.”

A flick of his wrist and Jimmy had the landing barge surging ahead, but now a severe vibrating sensation could be felt, caused by a twisted prop shaft and a severely damaged propeller.

“I think it needs a good tune up,” said the other Potter boy, knowingly.

“Open it out and see what it’ll do,” suggested Reggie.

“O.K, Full speed ahead, but I’ll take her under the bridges and down that way. The Yanks will see us if we go out into the Cattewater,” said Jimmy.

“You’re the captain,” said the first Potter brother.

“Isn’t this fun?” shouted Reggie, above the noise of an engine in dire distress, as well as a severe juddering sensation that could be felt throughout the stern of the vessel.

Passing under Laira Bridge, they waved and shouted to several surprised people who were walking across it, and then they passed under the railway-bridge, and with the tide fully in, the expanse of water in front of them appeared most inviting.

“You’re right. It really does need a good tune up,” said Jimmy. “I’ll see if I can clear it up by giving her full throttle.”

The barge’s speed increased, and so did the juddering, the whole vessel shaking now and the controls vibrating violently. At that moment a siren sounded from far astern, and turning their heads, the boys saw to their dismay that they had been spotted and were being chased by a US cutter with US military police and several Seabees aboard. The cutter was still a considerable distance away though, almost as far as Corporation Wharf.

“That’s done it,” said Reggie. “We can’t outrun them.”

“I’m going to put this thing up onto the rocks at Saltram, and then we can jump off and run away,” shouted Jimmy.

“But we can’t jump off the bow. We don’t know how to lower the ramp,” replied the other Potter boy. “And without that down, it’s far too high for us to jump down onto the rocks.”

The US cutter was gaining on them fast, its siren blaring long furious blasts.

Exasperated, Jimmy shouted, “You’re right, so I’m going in stern first. Hold on, you chaps.”

Bringing the barge around so that she had a mid-stream heading, Jimmy slammed the gears from forward to astern which immediately caused loud and horribly sounding grinding noises coming from somewhere deep within the engine cowling; but his actions did cause the vessel to heave to for a few moments. Then, with even louder protesting grinding noises coming from the gearbox or maybe from the engine, the landing barge began to go astern, slowly at first but all the while picking up speed.

With the US cutter now less than fifty yards away, the stern of the landing craft hit and crunched to a violent stop onto the rocks at Saltram Estate. On impact the barge's engine wheezed, gasped a final protest, and then stopped.

White helmeted US patrol police were now angrily shaking their fists and shouting to them from the cutter, but the four boys didn't look back. Instead, they jumped over the stern and onto the rocks, and then ran as fast as they could all the way to the nearby woods between Saltram and the railway lines. These were woods they knew well, where they could remain hidden, were safe and where the angry Yanks would not follow them. They had got away with it, or so they thought.

About a week later, Patrick, not knowing about the barge incident, accompanied the same four boys on a raft expedition bound for Turnchapel. They were in the middle of the wide Cattewater and almost off Oreston, when the same cutter caught up with them, its crew of two US Military Police wearing white helmets that had MP printed on them in bold capital letters.

"Yeh, those are the guys that stole our barge," one MP shouted to the other, the man at the wheel.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeh! I'm positive. I'd recognize those two blonde haired kids anywhere. See! They look identical, those two."

"That's good enough for me. I'm gonna get 'em," came back the reply.

"OK. But let's scare the living crap out of them first."

"Sure thing. Here goes."

Swinging the wheel over, the cutter turned and began to circle the raft menacingly, the circles getting tighter all the while, the wash from the cutter rolling the raft dangerously so that at any moment it seemed as if it must turn over. Fearfully the boys hung on to bare wood. Then the cutter pulled away from them, and the boys, believing it was leaving, were heaving sighs of relief when the cutter turned and at full speed drove straight at the side of the raft. It was about to hit the raft full on when the cutter's helmsman threw the wheel to port, just enough for the cutter's hull to hit a corner of the raft. The sudden impact and the high wake of the patrol boat tossed the raft to one side, almost overturning it and throwing all five

boys into the water.

“That’ll teach you guys to fool around with our landing crafts,” shouted the cutter’s helmsman, shaking a fist at the boys floundering in the water. And as the cutter roared away, Patrick learned to swim.

Fortunately, there appeared to be no bad feelings toward the boys from those Seabees who actually worked on the barges. They appeared to treat the matter as no more than a boyish prank. In fact, one of the Seabees was overheard nonchalantly saying to another, “Gee-wiz! If that’s all the damage the barges eventually get, I’ll sure be happy.”

The following Saturday, Patrick and Dennis set off for Dunstone Woods each carrying one of their mother’s shopping bags full of magazines, books and comics, all salvaged from the recycle trailer during the past week. They caught the bus as far as the church and then, as usual, walked the remainder of the way to the black Americans’ encampment.

At its entrance they found Snake Hips talking to the soldier on sentry duty, and as usual he beamed with pleasure at seeing the two boys arrive lugging their sacks of magazines and books.

“Hey, you guys, I’s sure glad to see you,” the big black man said, towering over the two little boys. “Hey! Dem bags dey sho look heavy. Leme have ‘em,” he said, taking the two sacks and holding them as if they were full of feathers. “The men sho likes dese,” Then he said, “Ah’s got somein’ I wanna show ya all.”

“You have!” exclaimed Dennis, puzzled.

“What is it?” Patrick asked.

“It’s somein’ me and ma sergeant wanna give you guys. Let’s go back to my shack in the woods and I’ll show you.”

With increasing curiosity the two boys followed Snake Hips back along the narrow path through the woods, passing many tents and their tenants, the men they now knew so well. What was it that their friend Snake Hips and the sergeant wanted them to have both wondered as they walked deeper into Dunstone Woods. Arriving at Snake Hips’s tent, he ushered them inside.

“Yesterday ah wus taking stores to one of da outfits, way out in the country near dis small town called Totnes. Jazz Bo rode with me. So after we delivered the stores, I got to thinking I’d like one of dem warm beers da Limies drink. So I says to Jazz Bo, ‘Jazz Bo, let’s go to that town back the road a bit.’ That’s cos when we were passing through dat place, I seed one hell of a lot of pubs up and down the main drag. So we goes back and dats when I sees deese guys in the window of a hock shop,” said Snake Hips. Reaching into his bedside locker he took from it an oblong cardboard box of about eighteen inches in length, twelve inches wide and four inches deep, and then a second box of the same dimensions.

"These are what the sergeant and I got for you from dat hock shop. Go on. Open dem. Take a look," said the kindly soldier, his face one big smile as he handed each boy one of the boxes.

Dennis, his face lighting up as he took off the lid of his box, screamed loudly, "Wow! It's toy soldiers!"

"Mine's got toy soldiers in it, too," cried out an equally surprised and delighted Patrick.

Sure enough each box contained a set of brightly painted lead soldiers, twenty-four in each box. In Dennis's were soldiers of the oldest unit of the British army, the Coldstream Guards, wearing their top-heavy-looking black bearskin hats, their smart red jackets and perfectly creased black trousers, whereas in Patrick's box were British soldiers in khaki uniforms, plus their machine guns and two artillery pieces.

"Hey, kids, how do you like dem?" a familiar voice came from the open flap in the tent.

Both boys looked up to see a beaming Sergeant David Wicker standing there. "Oh, thank you so much," answered Patrick. "We love them, Sergeant David."

"Yes, they're the best toy soldiers we've ever seen," exclaimed Dennis. "Even better than the toy soldiers that melted when our house was bombed. Thank you, Sergeant David, and thank you Snake Hips."

"We'll treasure them," said Patrick, carefully taking soldiers out of his box and placing them in fighting positions behind machine guns and an artillery piece on Snake Hips's bed.

"Yeh. I remember you saying that your toy soldiers were lost in a fire, so when we saw these in the hock shop window, we knew you'd like them," said the sergeant.

"They must have been very expensive," said Patrick.

Snake Hips grinned. "Sure thing. A couple cartons of Camel cigarettes, three cans of butter and a big ol' can of orange marmalade," he said.

Carrying their now treasured boxes of toy soldiers, plus a large box of food stuffs, two very happy boys were returned to Pomphlett that day, driven home by Snake Hips in a US army lorry. As usual, to their disappointment, Snake Hips refused to enter their home to meet their mother and brothers. Always he seemed in a hurry to return to camp. Florence was disappointed too that neither Snake Hips nor Sergeant David Wicker had ever ventured across the threshold and into their home. But then, Florence and her four sons had never heard, or knew of, the words 'discrimination or segregation.' It never occurred to them either to wonder why white American soldiers and black American soldiers never shared the same camp. Racial barriers in Britain were as foreign to Florence and her family as it was to most other British people.

On a warm Friday evening during the latter part of April, 1944, whilst scanning the advertisements in the pets column of Plymouth's Western Evening Herald, Reggie read an ad' listing young Chinchilla Giganta rabbits for sale. His curiosity aroused, he knew that that the Chinchilla Giganta matures at an early age, is

an excellent table rabbit, but he noted that the breeder's address was at Bigbury-on-Sea, a South Devon coastal village about fifteen to twenty miles away, a goodly distance for him to pedal his bike, and the route was sure to be hard going with its many steep hills. But still, it was Saturday tomorrow and if the weather held sunny and warm as it had done for the past three days, it could be an enjoyable ride, especially as he had never before been to Bigbury-on-Sea or to any other place past Yealmpton. With Mr. Dewhurst away at sea and he and Olive, the wife, looking after the husband's Flemish Giant rabbits, he had earned and saved several shillings, so, Reggie decided, this could be an excellent opportunity to increase his rabbit farm with a breed that was far heavier and which could produce more meat than his Dutch. He wondered if Philip Millard would like to go with him to Bigbury-on-Sea. Philip had a bike similar to his, just the one speed, not by any means new but certainly kept in a reasonably reliable condition. He decided to ask him, so he walked down the road the short distance to Philip's house at the bottom of Old Hill.

"Bigbury-on-Sea? Gosh, Reg, that's a long way from here," said Philip, who was the same age as Reggie. "I've never ridden a bike that far."

"Neither have I, but if we leave here right after breakfast, we could go for the day," countered Reggie.

"What would we do for food? There's nothing in my house I could take with me, and I don't have any money to buy anything."

"I've five shillings, so depending on the price of the rabbits, I'd probably have some to spare. I bet we would find a fish and chip shop somewhere in the Bigbury on Sea area, or a shop that sells something we can eat. And I've got a Corona bottle I could fill with water and take that with us."

"OK, Reg. That's alright by me. If it's not raining in the morning, I'll go with you."

Thus, at 9 A.M. the following morning, with a welcoming sun warming them, the two boys left home, Philip with a pack of Wrigley's chewing gum given to him by an American soldier dating his nineteen year old sister, and Reggie with five shillings in his pocket and a wooden box he had made strapped to the metal carrier attached above the rear mudguard of his bike. The box now contained the bottle of water, but its main purpose was for carrying either one grown rabbit or several young ones.

Fifteen minutes later they arrived at the village of Elburton, peddled up an incline to pass the Elburton Hotel on their left and then stopped peddling as they began the steep decent on the other side of the hill. Soon they reached Brixton village with its narrow road, passing the Foxhound pub on their right, then more hills all the way to Yealmpton where they stopped for a few minutes rest and a drink of water. Modbury village lay ahead, but before they reached it they asked a land army girl driving a tractor if they

were on the right road for Bigbury. The young woman replied, "Yes, boys, but don't go into Modbury. Take the next road branching off to the right."

This the two boys did, leaving the main road and walking their bikes up the steep hills and freewheeling down dale on what was no more than a lane meandering through the countryside of fields of young corn and potatoes. Tall hedgerows, alive with buttercups and foxgloves, graced the sides of the narrow road, and blackbirds and thrushes sang happily in the bushes and treetops. Grey rabbits with white, cotton wool like tails could be seen everywhere. Here, Britain seemed to be at peace with the world. The next village was Ringmore, but the narrow road only skirted the little village to its right. Here, Reggie again asked directions before continuing onward until they arrived at Bigbury-on-Sea, a coastal village overlooking the largest sandy beach in South Devon, which normally, during peacetime, had a small civilian population consisting mainly of fishermen and their families who lived in the old houses and a few retired military officers, either invalids or too old to further serve their country and living off their pensions. The latter mostly lived in relatively new bungalows surrounded by neatly kept little gardens. Now, though, young military men had overrun the whole area; they were everywhere, a few British military police and soldiers but mostly American soldiers and sailors, all in smart, clean and neat uniforms.

Outside a small and ancient looking pub Reggie asked a fisherman's wife selling fresh fish from a cart if she knew where a Mr. Robert Waraway lived in a house called Rabbit Haven. "Yes, I know it. Rabbit Haven! That's the red brick house at the top of yonder hill," she replied, pointing a bony finger toward a thatched corner cottage that stood several yards further along the road. "See the house with the thatched roof. You turn right at that corner."

The two boys thanked the woman and rode onward and upward until they reached the top of the hill and came to Rabbit Haven.

On opening the door to his home and confronting the two boys, Mr. Waraway explained to them that the last of the litter for sale had been sold an hour ago. Naturally, Reggie was deeply disappointed by this news but soon returned to his normal cheery self on being given a tour of the small rabbit breeding farm and being told that he would receive a letter direct to his home when the next litter of Chinchillas had been weaned and ready for sale. Mr. Waraway also gave the two boys a glass of home-made cider each, which prompted Philip to cheerfully remark, "Well, Reg, it's not a total loss."

On free-wheeling down the steep hill to the seafront they found a small fish and chip shop open that had a sign in its window, Fried Fish, 3 pence; Chips, three pence: Peas, 3 pence.

"Let's just have the fish and chips," suggested Philip. "I can do without the shirt-lifters."

“So can I,” said Reggie. So he paid a shilling for two fish and chips wrapped up in half pages of last weeks News of the World newspaper, and then the two boys sat down on the seawall that overlooked Burgh Island to eat and enjoy their hot and filling meal.

“We could go over to Burgh Island after we've finished our fish and chips,” said Philip, looking across at the tidal island to which the public could normally walk to when the tide was low. “That wide causeway appears to be made of firm sand, and the tide must be still going out.”

“We'll try it,” said Reggie. “But if the tide starts to come in, we wouldn't be able to walk back, especially if the tide came in very quickly. The causeway would then be under several feet of water. But, look! There're wooden barriers at our end. I doubt if we would be allowed to go past them.”

“Yeh, you're right, and they're guarded by military police, redcaps as well as Yanks. So that's put an end to that idea.”

“Anyone would think there was a war on,” joked Reggie. Then, “Look, Philip, there's barbed wire all along the sea front. And I bet those huge pieces of metal crosses half buried in the sand are to stop invading landing craft. They wouldn't be seen when the tide's in, and anything crossing them would get their bottom ripped out.”

They were still discussing Burgh Island and the beaches when shouts rang out coming from the harbour and two fishermen hurried past them, one saying to the other, “Looks like they've found another Yank's body floating in. That'll be seven in the last two days.”

Intrigued, Reggie said, “Come on, Philip, let's see what happening over there.”

On reaching the harbour, Reggie asked a fisherman, who replied, “I don't rightly know. But see the boat that's just come in. There're two more dead American soldiers on it. We've been picking them up for the last couple of days, all dead, drowned, mind you, and floating upside down.”

“How strange!” exclaimed Reggie. “What happened?”

“Nobody rightly knows, but something big must 'ave 'appened,” said the fisherman. “They all got Mae West life jackets on, but it seems they've been put on wrong, and with heavy packs on their backs they just gone and turned over in the water and got drowned. I hear that many more Yank soldiers have been found washed up all along the beaches, and yesterday one even floated into this 'ere harbour.”

Two bodies, wrapped in sailcloth, were being taken off the fishing boat by American soldiers when several British police constables with a sergeant in charge arrived and began to disperse the small crowd of gawkers that had quickly formed. Moments later an American military ambulance arrived on the scenes, the two bodies were quickly placed inside it, the rear doors slammed shut and the ambulance sped away.

The police constables finally dispersed the crowd until eventually all became quiet and serene again, as if nothing extraordinary had happened during the last hour in the peaceful seaside village of Bigbury-on-Sea.

Astounded by what had happened, Reggie and Philip wandered along the sea front, half expecting to see more bodies floating in on the rapidly incoming tide. But they saw nothing unusual on the water, just seagulls riding the incoming waves or wheeling and screeching overhead and diving into the water to snatch up small fish and shrimps. Eventually they arrived at where a group of four old but hardy-looking fishermen sat on upturned fish boxes and crab traps diligently repairing fishing nets. All seemed agitated and worried looking, and spoke in subdued voices, but loud enough for the two boys to overhear their conversation.

“Last night military boats were out fairly scooping up bodies. Dan here, and myself, we were ordered to get out of the area, all the way the length of Slapton Sands, and even beyond. Wonder if a troopship got torpedoed!” said one of them.

“Must be somethin' big going on, that's for damn sure. Twenty-five square miles have been sealed off between Kingsbridge and Dartmouth. That's during the last few weeks,” said a second man. “Twenty-five square miles mark you, and everyone cleared out of the area, 'bout twenty-five thousand civilians, all forced to leave their homes.”

“That's true,” confirmed the fisherman sitting opposite the last speaker. “Fishermen, farmers, churchgoers, the school children, everyone, even the pub owners. Jack Johnson that runs the Jolly Roger told me that.”

“They say 'tis for military manoeuvres. Even the beaches, all the way along Slapton Sands, you can't go ashore there anymore. There're signs and army guards everywhere,” said the third fisherman.

“And they'd shoot you without thinking twice, I'd wager, if you dared set foot on land,” the fourth fisherman was saying when the two boys were spotted, obviously listening to the conversation.

“Let's go home,” said Reggie to Philip. “I've heard and seen enough.”

Little did few know, at the time, that the twenty-five square miles had been cleared of its population for manoeuvres with live ammunition, but also for preparing the military for its invasion of German-held France on D-Day.

\*It wasn't until many years after the war had ended that the truth as to what really happened that caused the death of those drowned American servicemen was made known to the world. The following facts the author has read and heard from various reliable sources, and to his knowledge they are true.

On the twenty-eighth of April, 1944, eight LSDs loaded with tanks, guns, trucks, ammunition, fuel and

hundreds of American military men, left Plymouth, England, and were off Slapton Sands and ready to begin manoeuvres, code name Exercise Tiger, by storming ashore on the long, pebbly beach, a practice run in preparation for D-Day. The convoy of LSDs was supposed to be protected by two destroyers of the British Royal Navy, but because of different radio frequencies the two destroyers did not arrive leaving the lightly armed LSD's alone and unprotected at sea. Tragically, their mixed radio signals were picked up and understood by the Germans who immediately sent nine E-Boats, fast, motor torpedo boats, out from Calais to intercept and attack them. The loaded LSD's, with no protecting ships to escort them, were sitting ducks for the swift and deadly German E-boats.

An LSD loaded with twenty-two DUKWs, (amphibious landing craft,) and crammed with men in full battledress was attacked and sunk, another was sunk with a loss of an estimated 490 men, another with 258 men, With the trucks on board the LSD's loaded with petrol and ammunition, the explosions and heat aboard the stricken craft was awesome. Men, loaded down with heavy back packs, weapons, grenades and ammunition, jumped into the sea wearing Mae West type life jackets, but as they had never been instructed as to how to wear the life jackets correctly, many of the men simply turned upside down and drowned. All the LSD's were either sunk or put on fire during the attack, which lasted less than an hour with a loss of about 800 American servicemen and a staggering amount of war materials intended for use on D-Day,. It was one of the biggest tragedies during the war and one of the best kept secrets for several years after the war had ended.

Many years later, an American tank was hauled from that military graveyard and now stands halfway along the pebbly beach of Slapton Sands, a memorial plaque attached to it, in memory of the men who perished so close to shore and so unnecessarily on that fateful day of the twenty-eighth of April 1944.\*

During the latter part of April the baseball season began at Foresters Field, and now, with the coming of May, baseball bats were in full swing, with Sergeant Bill Bradford captain of his Seabees' team playing a US army team from the 81st division. The Seabees couldn't have wished for a more enthusiastic crowd of supporters to cheer them on, the boys as well as numerous young and older girls from Pomphlett and the surrounding area. Of course, very few of the local boys and girls knew anything about baseball except that it was somewhat like playing rounders, but how they cheered when Bill Bradford's team was on and hitting the ball in all directions.

Always, when the weather was kind to them, both Saturdays and Sundays were enjoyable afternoons spent at Foresters Field, for the American servicemen baseball players as well as for the many spectators, both military personnel and civilians alike. Often there were different visiting teams playing: men of the

29th Armoured Division, the US Navy, and the 3rd Battalion of the 116th Infantry of the 29th Division, who were stationed at Crownhill Barracks and bused in.

Last but certainly not least were the men of the US 4th Division, wearing their proud insignia, a patch on the left arm of their uniform composed of four green ivy leaves attached at the stems and opening at the four corners of a square on a brown background. The US 4th Division was the only team that did not lose one game of baseball at Foresters Field, even beating Bill Bradford's team, who were pretty darn good.

During one sunny Saturday afternoon whilst watching baseball at Foresters Field, Patrick got into conversation with a group of young men in Royal Air Force uniforms, only to find out that they were actually members of 10 Squadron of the Royal Australian Air Force and stationed at RAF Mount Batten. A week later, the same group of Australian airmen returned to Foresters Field to play baseball against Bill Bradford and his team and put on a 'jolly good show', as an Englishman in the Australian team described the game. Although they lost sixteen to seven, the Australians won much applause, especially when one of their team scored a home run whilst wielding a cricket bat that had been sportingly and good-humouredly allowed by their American opponents. At Forester's Field that day, it was indeed a fun game played in gloriously warm and sunny weather.

From the garden, Dennis was now enjoying the fruits of his labour, pulling succulent French Breakfast radishes from the ground and cutting All The Year Round and Tom Thumb lettuce, early varieties that are easily grown in South Devon's spring and early summer climate. Carrots, the long and tapered Early Nantes variety, he began to pull, too. He dug up the first of the early potatoes during the second week of May, the Duke of York variety, which is a kidney shaped and fine flavoured potato. In the kitchen he would rub the skins off the new potatoes for his mother to boil in salty water, at times with a few sprigs of young and fresh mint added, gathered from the herb bed that the boys had made outside the kitchen window. After they were cooked and allowed to steam a while, hearty appetites soon emptied the bowl of Dennis's mouth-watering early potatoes.

Patrick was interested in growing other crops. At least twice a week, for the past month, he had been picking long and fully filled broad beans. Now, with the warmer weather of mid-May heating the soil, his kidney and runner beans were getting close to harvesting. His peas, too, were almost ready for picking. Patrick also kept the soft fruit bushes weeded, and he trained the loganberry vines along the wire fence that separated the garden from that of Mr. Brooks, who was an excellent gardener and who often gave the boys tips on improving their gardening skills and knowledge.

Reggie did most of the heavy work in the garden, preferring to dibble in cabbage plants and the like with a trowel rather than the more time consuming and finicky task of sowing tiny seeds in what had to be well-prepared soil. He did plant marrow seeds though, very early in the year, and when young plants pushed their heads above the soil, whenever frost was expected, he protected them by covering the tender stems and leaves with straw. A few weeks later, the whole family enjoyed the fruits of his labour, his Long Green Trailing variety that found their way over several square yards of the garden and were already producing vegetable marrows of immense size.

There are not too many ways to cook vegetable marrows. One may skin them, clean out the seeds, cut them into chunks and then boil, braise, or roast them. But Florence found a way in which, not only did the boys find the flesh of the marrow appetizing but also it became a delicacy, the Sunday joint, where formerly, before the war and rationing began, roast beef or lamb would have been the centrepiece on the table. For some unknown reason Florence called her newly found Sunday joint, The Duck Under The Table, and it proved a great success with her family of hungry boys. Here is her recipe:

Florence took a large marrow, cut off its skin, took out the seeds and then stuffed it with a mixture of soaked stale bread, chopped up spam and other bits of left over meat, sautéed onions and chopped parsley, plus salt and pepper for seasoning. Then, placing the 'duck' in her largest roasting pan, she surrounded it with gravy, smeared fat over it, and then baked it in a very hot oven. When cooked and on the table, with a little imagination that simple vegetable marrow actually looked like a roasted duck minus its legs and wings. Carved into thick slices and served hot with steaming Bisto gravy, it tasted delicious and took the place of the Sunday roast on a number of occasions. Reggie received top marks for not only his vegetable marrow growing, but also for his overall gardening skills.

Walter, on the other hand, was a different story. As he was the only breadwinner in the family and worked long hours, often not returning home until after eleven at night from his job as projectionist at the Plaza Cinema, he was unofficially excused from working in the garden.

On arriving home from work, Walter often brought news of the happenings in Plymouth. Toward the end of May, he told the family of how he had taken a walk from the Plaza along Vauxhall Street to Sutton Pool and found that it was jammed full with several types of landing craft big and small. He then walked around The Barbican for awhile, which he said had far less bomb damage than the city centre, and carried on to eventually stop and rest awhile at the Mayflower Stone from where the Mayflower had set sail for America. American servicemen crowded the area, clicking their cameras exuberantly as they photographed the plaque and the same stone steps that had led down to the deck of the Mayflower all those years ago.

Captain James Cook had also sailed from those same steps, on his three world voyages.

Walter spoke of how he had walked up the hill at Madeira Road and had passed Phoenix Wharf, the docking and turning around point of the Oreston and Turnchapel ferries. Then bearing sharply around to the right, he had passed the Royal Citadel. From there he could look out over Plymouth Sound and see the breakwater, and looking further out he could just make out the Eddystone Lighthouse fourteen miles off the coast. Walking along the seafront to the Lido, from there he could see the charred and rusted skeletal remains of the beautiful pier that had once graced the foreshore. The pier had been firebombed and completely destroyed in March, 1941. But what amazed him as he walked along the seafront surrounding Plymouth Hoe was that much of Plymouth Sound was chock-a-block with American Liberty ships quietly riding at anchor, so many he could picture in his mind someone walking across their decks, all the way from Devon and into Cornwall.

Apprehension was now very high among Plymouthians that the Germans would strike again, and with incredible force, but their fears were never justified. Though they were not to know it, that sharp raid in the early hours of April, 30th, 1944, was to be the last that they would see of German bombers.

On the last day of May the Home Guard, who no longer carried broom handles and pitchforks to defend themselves, but who now had rounds of ammunition for new rifles, practiced at a firing range in Pomphlett Quarries. The rifle range was situated between the air raid shelter under the railway line and Pleasure Hill, a very narrow tarmacked lane that began opposite Pomphlett Post Office and ran around the top of the face of a no longer worked quarry. On leaving the range the men of the Home Guard had forgotten to take with them a wooden ammunition box that still contained about fifty rounds of 303 rifle ammunition. Naturally, Reggie and the Potter twins were the ones to find the box and they quickly decided that the best way to get rid of the ammunition and to have some fun at the same time would be to light a small bonfire beneath the box.

Patrick and Dennis, who were busy picking and eating wild strawberries that grew in abundance annually on the railway embankment nearby, happened to spot Reggie and the two Potter brothers as they were collecting pieces of wood for their bonfire.

"I don't think that's a good idea at all," said Patrick, on being told about the live ammunition and their plans for its fiery disposal.

"Nor do I," said Dennis. "It's daft. A bullet may hit someone."

"Nah. We'll point the box toward the firing range below Pleasure Hill," Reggie replied.

"But what if the box explodes?" asked Patrick. "All three of you could get killed."

“Aw! Don’t be such wet blankets,” said one of the Potter brothers. “We can hide behind this big pile of sand. Come on! Help us collect some more wood.”

“No. Definitely not” Patrick answered. “Dennis, are you going to stay and watch them carry out this daft idea?”

“I’d rather pick strawberries,” Dennis replied. “But I don’t want to be on the railway bank when those bullets start whizzing around. Let’s wait and hide with them behind the sand bank. We’ll pick more strawberries after all the bullets have exploded.”

Sufficient wood was soon gathered and placed in a pile within a hollow of sand, and then the box of 303 ammunition containing live rounds of ammunition, pointing toward the quarry’s target practice area, was placed on it by one of the Potter brothers. His brother lit the pile with pieces of scrap paper pushed beneath the wood and soon flames engulfed the box. The boys waited expectantly, and had not long to wait. The rounds of ammunition began to explode, just ones and twos at first. Bang! Bang! Bang! Then all Hell broke loose as the burning box blew apart and at the same time a near deafening explosion rent the air and bullets flew in all directions, pinging into rocks and ricocheting off into the unknown.

Above the noise, Patrick, crouching behind the heap of sand, yelled at Reggie, “I told you it was a daft idea. The police are sure to want to know what all the noise is about. We’d better get ourselves out of here, and fast.”

“Nah! Don’t worry. They’ll think the Home Guard is still practicing,” Reggie yelled back.

Bullets sped through the top of the sandbank where they crouched, by now apprehensively. Others were slamming into the railway embankment or ricocheting off the metal railway lines and stone ballast behind them.

“They’re going to think the Home Guard are lousy shots,” shouted Patrick dryly.

“This was really a daft thing to do, Reggie,” said Dennis.

Reggie shrugged. “Well, you don’t know unless you try,” he said.

The last rounds of ammunition exploded in ones and twos followed by a sudden deathly silence.

“I think that was the last of them,” said Reggie.

“We’d best wait a couple more minutes,” said Patrick.

Suddenly, Dennis yelled, “I can see a policeman’s helmet bobbing up and down. It’s just coming up over the wall at Stamp’s Corner.”

“Crickey! That must be ol’ P.C. Bail. Let’s get out of here,” shouted Reggie.

Crouching down, the five of them ran as fast as they could to where bushes and trees grew on a

slippery bank and where a muddy path led down to the duck ponds. It was not until they were over the edge of the overgrown bank and running down the path hidden by bushes that they felt safe. Taking a breather, they then made a very long detour back home, walking away from Plymstock and along Billacombe Road. On reaching farmer Hind's apple orchard, they crossed the road and climbed up a steep dirt track of a hill called Blackberry Lane until they reached what was known as the New Houses. Here they walked down Howard Road and onto Pomphlett Road, walked toward the post office, but about halfway there they cut through the driveway that led down to Richardson's burned out school, walked to the end and then crawled through Mrs. Collier's garden fence and into her garden. Here, in Pomphlett Gardens, they were home free, leaving a perplexed Police Constable Bail scratching his head as he stood over what little remained of a still-burning bonfire surrounded by spent and smoking cartridge cases. Fortunately for him all the live ammunition had already exploded.

On a beautiful sunny Sunday at the beginning of June, Patrick and Dennis went to church in the morning and at the end of the service, each carrying a shopping bag containing comics and magazines, they walked to Dunstone Woods. Even as they left the narrow tarmacked lane and approached the woods along the rutted pathway, they knew that since their last visit just a week ago something was amiss. Usually several lorries and jeeps were parked at the entrance to the camp, but today there were none.

Puzzled, Dennis said, "There're always some lorries here. I wonder where they've gone."

"Maybe they've gone on manoeuvres," replied Patrick.

"Not all of them. Not on a Sunday."

They walked onward in puzzled silence, and as they got closer to the parking place under the trees, they could see that it, too, was devoid of vehicles. Today, not even the usual half a dozen jeeps were parked out of sight beneath the trees. But worse, the sentry's post at the entrance to the camp had been removed, and inside the camp they could see that all the tents were gone. In disbelief the two boys walked through the woods to find it completely empty of men as well as all their tons of equipment. Astonished and dismayed they wandered among the trees where, just last week, a score or more of tents had been erected, and now there were none. The latrines had been filled in, the camp kitchen was gone and the ground raked over allowing the land to be reclaimed by nature. It was as if the US army battalion of black soldiers had never been there; had never existed. The one and only sign of their previous presence were initials and names and hearts carved into the bark of trees, nothing else.

"They've all gone," said Dennis, completely dumbfounded.

"And they didn't even tell us they were going," said Patrick sadly.

Shaking his head, Dennis said, "We were their best friends. I can't believe they would leave without telling us."

"Neither can I. Snake Hips knows where we live. He could have come and told us."

"I'm sad," said Dennis.

"I am, too. I just don't understand them leaving like this. They didn't even say good-bye."

The trees were already out in full leaf, shading what had been the tented camp erected below stout boughs. And here the two boys wandered dejectedly along a well-worn path through the woods to where Snake Hips's tent had been. There was no rubbish to be seen, no litter, just recently raked over ground upon which a few leaves had recently fallen. A squirrel caught Patrick's eyes as it scampered away and ran up a tree. It, too, seemed puzzled by the absence of all those that used to throw it food. Sitting on a bough, it cleaned its whiskers and chattered away to itself as it surveyed the two intruders below.

"Look, Patrick!" shouted Dennis. "Snake Hips wrote his name into the tree here. See!"

"Yeh. Just look at that. 'Snake Hips & Susy Q,' that's what it says."

"And unless they come back, this writing on the tree, the toy soldiers they gave us, and our memories of them, that will be all that remain of them, that they were ever here," said Dennis sadly.

"I think they knew they were leaving," said Patrick. "That's why they gave us the toy soldiers. It was a present to remember them by. I don't think they will ever come back." And then, after a few moments of silence, he said, "Sergeant David gave me his home address in America. I'm going to write to him and ask what happened to them all; and why did they leave in such a hurry. Dennis, let's go home."

While walking dejectedly back to the church they met a farmer scything hay that grew tall and wild at the side of the road.

"Mister, do you know what happened to all the Yanks that were camped in the woods?" Patrick asked him.

"I don't know, boy. I seed 'em gathering up their stuff, and then they up and left, every one of them. That was late yesterday afternoon."

"Thank you," said Patrick. He then asked, "Would you like these magazines? We brought them for the Yanks, but as they are not here, would you like them?"

"Me, I don't read much," replied the farmer, "But I'm sure the misses would like to look at them."

"They're yours, then," said Patrick. With only their thoughts and memories, the two boys walked sadly and in silence the rest of the way home, Dennis, at times, having tears in his eyes.

On the evening of June 4th both Dennis and Patrick joined other boys to 'go down and play with the

Yanks' at Pomphlett Creek. They swam, paddled their rafts and chatted with the Seabees. The only difference that Patrick noticed was that Sergeant Bill Bradford said very little and was not his usual cheerful self. Nevertheless the boys had a fun late afternoon and evening at the creek, and then went home for their supper.

On June 5th it was raining hard and a strong wind blew. The brothers stayed home, playing cards and listening to the wireless.

The following morning Patrick woke up earlier than usual; it was just getting light. He lay in bed listening. Something was wrong. It was too quiet. Normally he could hear American voices from the cul-de-sac outside the window, the starting of a motor, even the loud grinding and clanking of tank tracks manoeuvring on the narrow road. But today there were none. He listened, straining his ears to hear whatever was going on out in the road, but an uncanny silence reigned. Getting out of his bed, he quietly went into Walter and Reggie's bedroom, looked out of the window and gasped in disbelief. The road that had been full of American fighting vehicles the previous evening was now completely deserted.

"Hey! Walter! Reggie! Wake up! The Yanks have gone. All of them!" he shouted.

"What? Gone where?" asked Reggie in a sleepy voice.

"I don't know. It's just like the Yanks up in the woods. They've vanished. They're all gone."

Both Walter and Reggie scrambled out of bed and looked out of the window.

"Gosh! You're right," exclaimed Walter. "They were there when I got home at eleven last night: three tanks, several lorries, a couple of jeeps and a lot of American army chaps. I said, 'Good night,' to them, and several answered, 'Good night, chum,' like they always do. But, come to think of it, they all wore backpacks and most of them were carrying guns. That was the first time I'd seen them carrying guns. And another thing, when I came out of the Plaza last night, lorry after lorry full of American soldiers, long convoys of them, went past me on Exeter Street. The Plaza's manager said they were all heading for Millbay Docks."

Dennis joined them. "They've all gone," he said in a troubled voice.

"We can see that, by their absence," said Reggie dryly.

Patrick said, "I'm going to dress and go down through Pomphlett to see if I can find out what's happening."

"I'll go with you," said Reggie.

"And me," said Dennis. "I think we should go down to Pomphlett Creek, too. We can ask Sergeant Bill or his men if they know what's going on."

"Yeh, that's a good idea," said Reggie. "Walter, are you coming with us?"

“No. I’m going back to bed,” replied Walter. “But when Mammy asks, I’ll tell her where you’ve gone.”  
“Thanks. We won’t wake her,” said Reggie.

Hurriedly dressing, the three brothers walked quickly through a strangely silent and deserted Pomphlett Gardens. There was not an American soldier to be seen and all the tanks, gun-carriers, lorries, jeeps and various other US military vehicles that had been parked throughout the village just yesterday had gone. Rounding the corner at butcher Kirby’s shop, they could now see the mill end of Pomphlett Creek, and the three boys became even more puzzled, because now they could see placid water where yesterday they saw landing barges moored side by side in vast numbers. Wondering what had happened during the night, the three walked on in silence, and on reaching the head of the creek, they found to their astonishment that the whole long stretch of water was now completely empty of landing barges; and on the road there was not one person in sight. Always there had been at least two or three American soldiers on guard. Dumbfounded and in silence, the three boys carried on walking to eventually reach the far end of the creek. There they stood on the same rocky patch of foreshore where Sergeant Bill Bradford and his men had worked for so long and so diligently getting ready those scores of landing barges that just yesterday had filled the creek. But today there were no jeeps parked on the foreshore, no landing barges ready to go on trials, and no men present. All had slipped quietly away during the night. The place was deserted and an eerie silence prevailed.

“They are just like my old toy soldiers. They’ve just vanished,” said Dennis sadly.

“Like your toy soldiers, they’ve just melted away,” said Reggie in an unusually melancholy voice.

“Yes, but these were not toy soldiers. These were real soldiers,” said Patrick sorrowfully. “And I don’t think they’ll ever come back.”

“But they didn’t even say good-bye to us. Not one of them,” said Dennis, tears forming in his eyes as he stared out across the deserted open water.

“They must have had a good reason for not saying anything to us,” said Patrick.

“Well, Whatever their reason, they’ve all gone, so we might as well go home,” said Reggie. “There’s nothing for us to do around here now.” Picking up a flat stone, he skipped it across the water and watched as it sank from sight near the seawall of the Morley Arms. A light rain began to fall. “Come on. Let’s go or we’ll get wet. And I’ve got to feed my rabbits.”

During breakfast that morning, Florence and her four sons ate in unusual silence, all knowing that something big was happening that day. They all felt it, but didn’t know what it could be. Outside, in the street, the emptiness was ominous. Florence turned on the wireless much earlier than usual, and she and

her sons listened intently for any news of what was happening, but the only programs that came over the air was a talk on gardening followed by light music.

“I wonder if they’ll come back,” Dennis said, staring all the while at the two open boxes of lead soldiers that lay in front of him on the dining room table.

“I doubt it,” said Reggie in an unusually serious tone of voice. “I think they’ve all gone to fight the Germans.”

“And the toy soldiers from Sergeant David and Snake Hips were goodbye presents to us. They knew they were leaving but could not tell us,” said Dennis. “I’ll keep my toy soldiers always, and I’ll always remember those black Americans. They were always so good to us.”

“I’ll keep my toy soldiers, too,” said Patrick. “I’ll leave them in the box, and when I look at them I’ll remember not only the black Americans but all the white ones as well, like Sergeant Bill, Buddy York, Frank, and all those other chaps.”

Florence kept the wireless on the remainder of that morning, but it was not until the midday news came through on the B.B.C that the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, came on the air to tell the world that Allied forces had successfully landed on the Normandy beaches of Nazi occupied France, and that the invasion of France, code-named Overlord, had begun.

Florence again silently gave thanks to having married late in life at the age of thirty-two, and was thinking, if I had married earlier and had these four boys a few years sooner, at this very moment they too would probably be fighting in Nazi occupied France and getting killed or badly wounded. She chilled as she wondered just how many of those young American soldiers her boys had come to know so well would ever return safely to their homes across the water. Her mind was dwelling on this when the wireless went dead. The shilling in the electric meter had run out. She sighed and got up from her chair to get another shilling from her purse.

It was now June 6th 1944. A million and a half troops, American, British and Canadian, supported by allies from nine other countries, had embarked from Britain on the greatest amphibious invasion ever. The beginning of the end of Hitler’s Nazi Germany and the Third Reich had begun. It was D-Day.

THE END

© 2011, Peter Neville