

WWII AND ITS IMPACT ON THE POYNTZPASS AREA

BY HELEN DELAHUNTY AND FRANK WATTERS.

The presence of approximately sixteen thousand British, American and lastly Belgian servicemen rotating through the four “Big Houses” of the area from late 1939 until after the end of the European War in 1945, as well as evacuees, obviously had a considerable impact on life in Poyntzpass and its neighbouring districts.

Two less direct impacts were (a) the severe censorship of all news and (b) the preparations for defence should the German forces put into effect their Operation Sea Lion plan to invade England, and its subsidiary, though less thought through Operation Green to invade the Irish Free State (as the RoI was then called) in its south east corner, and thence move north via the Dublin-Belfast corridor, thus making Jerrettzpass and Poyntzpass in the direct path.



Map showing the camps in the area

Immediately, in September 1939, the British Government imposed severe censorship on all news, whether letters, newspapers, radio or other media. *The Newry Reporter* for example has no mention of the influx of thousands of soldiers, of any of the training camps in the district, of the Belfast

blitz, or of the subsequent evacuation of thousands of the city’s women and children to the countryside. The War Office in London syndicated all the news of the war to the newspapers and radio which told the population in 1941, for example, that the Germans were losing the war and that the British had inflicted

great losses on the German army!

The Pioneer Corps, newly formed for such construction work in 1939, built "pill boxes" of reinforced concrete in Scarva, in the Far Pass (Loughadian), Gilford, etc. which were intended as sentry boxes or for other defensive uses.

The Pioneer Corps were stationed at what developed into Acton House Camp, at the top of Chapel Hill. One of their principal jobs was to build Nissen huts in all the requisitioned big estates in the area.

Because of the fear of a German invasion via the Free State the 53rd Welsh Division stayed in the South Down/South Armagh area along the border until 1944. Part of the Division camped in the fields at Doyle's Hill, beside the Blackbridge Road, outside Poyntzpass. The regiment later moved to the Gilford area, presumably as the threat of a German invasion via southern Ireland receded.

The Military Camps

The four military camps in the immediate vicinity of Poyntzpass were at **Drumbanagher**, **Dromantine**, **Acton House**, and **Union Lodge**. The building of these camps followed a well-defined pattern. Before war broke out in September 1939 the British government had identified possible sites and had requisitioned the land under the **Emergency Powers Act** of August that year. The landowners had no say in the matter, but were compensated for the use of their land. The Pioneer Corps and the Royal Engineers developed these sites.

It is difficult to ascertain which units of the various armies were stationed in which camp; however, the order seems to have been the British first, next the Americans from February 1942 and the Belgians from around August 1944. It seems that none of the three armies ever shared a camp. Local people only realised the scale of these camps, when, after the war had ended, the Nissen huts that had housed the troops were sold by public auction for example,

UNION LODGE MILITARY CAMP, POYNTZPASS, CO. DOWN.
ATTRACTIVE SALE OF
130 NISSEN HUTS, HEATING UNITS, and the Usual Camp Equipment
To be SOLD BY PUBLIC AUCTION on TUESDAY, 26th November, 1946, at 10 o'clock and 12-30 o'clock.

100 STANDARD Nissen Huts, 36ft. x 16ft.; ten Huts, 72ft. x 16ft.; one 96ft. x 16ft.; one Double-span Hut, 72ft. x 32ft.—all double sheeted (a number of these Huts have dormer windows); Brick-built Cook House, 50ft. x 40ft.; three Houses, 37ft. x 20ft.; one Large Brick House, 100ft. x 14ft.; two 36ft. x 14 ft.; three 24ft. x 14ft.; two 16ft. x 14ft. and 18ft. x 14ft.; Bath House, 60ft. x 48ft.—all with asbestos roofing; 7 Asbestos and Corrugated Iron Sheds, 26ft. x 24ft., 24ft. x 14ft., 20ft. x 10ft., 14ft. x 12ft.; a number of smaller Sheds, and about 150 Asbestos and Iron Sheets; Large 3-section Heating Unit, with two hot water cylinders and 1,000-gallon feed tank, also piping, showers, and connections; a smaller Heating Unit; six Galvanised Water Tanks (about 500-gallon); fourteen Farm Boilers; ten Soyer Boilers; one hundred Heating Stoves; 10 Cooking Ranges; several Jaw Tubs; about 30 Wash Benches, suitable for feeding troughs; Piping and Brass Taps; a large quantity of Timber, suitable for slate laths; Doors and Frames; and the usual assortment of Camp Equipment. Sale of Boilers and Equipment—10 o'clock; Sale of Huts and Heating Units—12-30 o'clock. This Camp is about one mile from Poyntzpass Railway Station. Light Refreshments available at moderate charges.
Terms—Cash, with Auction Commission.

J. BEST, Auctioneer, Poyntzpass; and Newry.

Advertisement for the sale of Nissen huts.

130 huts of various sizes at Drumbanagher, and 130 at Union Lodge.

Drumbanagher House:

At Drumbanagher the first arrivals were two British anti-tank regiments, the 71st and 68th Anti-Tank Regiments of the Royal Artillery followed by a company of the Yorkshire Regiment. At Drumbanagher there were in fact two camps, as well as occupying the huts, there were quite a number of purpose-built stores and offices. As well as this, several outbuildings around the estate were converted into accommodation. American army units arrived in N Ireland from January 1942. The first Americans to arrive at Drumbanagher belonged to the 436 Medical Collecting Corps. They were followed by various companies occupying the local camps, rarely staying more than six months before being moved to a new location. They were given a very warm welcome.

At Drumbanagher, the officers lived in the 'Big House' while the ordinary soldiers were in the Nissen huts and other buildings in the grounds. One American officer of the 2nd Combat Engineers, Lt. Col. Robert Snetzer who spent six months at Drumbanagher, kept a diary of his experiences during World War II and while disappointingly he does not refer much to Drumbanagher or Poyntzpass, he describes a memorable night with Major Close.¹

“We were invited to (visit) Major Maxwell Close, owner of the Estate. He spent the entire time talking about foxhunting, hounds and horses. He is the Master of Hounds and that is all he lives for. It was like dropping into the last century to visit him”

Within the camps military law prevailed and the military authorities dealt with any incident of indiscipline or violence. The local public courts did not apply. For the duration of the American troops’ time at Drumbanagher, Dromantine or elsewhere, the estate became legally part of the United States, with sentries posted at all entrances. Local police had no authority or jurisdiction in the camps.

Censorship prevailed and activities within the camp were strictly secret. An example of this was an incident at Drumbanagher. Lt. Col. Snetzer records the incident in his diary on March 23rd 1944 *“Yesterday we had a tragic accident in training. Sergeant Robinson and Private Elkins were killed when they lifted an AT mine which was activated and blew up in their faces.”* There was no mention of this in local press and the local police had no role in investigating this incident.

During Snetzer’s time at Drumbanagher from around November 1943 till April 1944 it seems that there was hardly a dry day so he didn’t see the country at its best. Snetzer’s role entailed travelling round various camps and so during his time here he visited camps in every part of N. Ireland. One result of these many camps was a huge increase in the volume of traffic. What had been narrow, quiet country roads now became very busy. Snetzer writes of the difficulty of driving on the left, a view echoed by many of the American servicemen.

The combination of this with the volume of traffic and black-out regulations led to numerous accidents involving army vehicles. One fatal accident occurred locally on 7th December 1942 when the Rev. Thomas Coulter, Presbyterian Minister of Cremore and Tyrone’s Ditches was killed when an American army lorry struck him on the Markethill Road, near Pipes’ Loanin, while he was cycling on his way to Poyntzpass Station. Robert Snetzer recorded that on Sunday 16th April 1944 the Americans left Drumbanagher, *“Marched*

out of the gates at 6.00 am. Battalion boarded train at Poyntzpass at 7 am. Arrived Great Northern Station at 9 am.

Completed embarkation on liner ‘Santa Rosa’ by 10.30am....3,693 troops aboard”.

Dromantine

The priests of the *Society of African Missions* continued to run their seminary in Dromantine House while the grounds held first, several hundred Irish Fusiliers, then a company of Military Police and in 1942 the first black American soldiers arrived, part of the 626 Ordnance Ammunition Company.

There were two distinct groups of American soldiers; the white Americans who were stationed at Drumbanagher and the black Americans who were at Dromantine. As no black soldier could be promoted above the rank of sergeant, all the officers at Dromantine were white.

As Snetzer’s diary entry regarding his evening with Major Close suggests, the white Americans tended to see the locals as backward and old-fashioned. They often came from a more affluent society and in their dealings with locals were sometimes seen as brash and over confident. Initially the local people, many of whom had never seen a black man before, were scared of, or at least wary of the black American soldiers, but over time came to accept them perhaps more easily than their somewhat more arrogant white colleagues.



Dromantine

The grounds of Dromantine became a *“huge arms dump”*, with stacks of ammunition piled along the avenues. Much of this ammunition appears to have been brought on special trains to Poyntzpass station and then transferred to Dromantine and other camps in army trucks. While the transfer of

ammunition to the trucks at the station was in progress the station had to be guarded by armed troops. What had the potential to be a major disaster occurred at Poyntzpass station one night during the war, when wagons containing 96 tons of high explosives became detached from an engine and blocked the track. With a train en-route from Goraghwood, it was due to the quick action of the then station-master, William Porterfield, that the wagons were re-coupled and moved into the siding and an accident avoided. In keeping with the news blackout there was no report of this incident in the local press at the time it happened and it wasn't until ten years later - when Mr Porterfield was retiring - that during a tribute to him this incident was mentioned and recorded in an article in *'The Ulster Gazette'*.

The archivist at the *Society of African Missions* headquarters in Cork went through the Society's papers for 1939 - 1944 on our behalf, and has found that censorship prevailed there too. Hardly anyone acknowledged the existence of hundreds of soldiers right outside their windows in these years. However, Rev. David O'Regan, a student at Dromantine then, wrote in a memoir, that the black soldiers.....

"..... were not considered good enough for front line duties.... We got on well with them although they did not like to be told that we were training for evangelisation work in Africa, the home of their ancestors. That was before the time when black Americans took pride in their African roots"

Acton House Camp:

This extensive camp was, over the course of the war, the base for British, American and Belgian troops in turn. The Pioneer Corps came first and oversaw construction of the camp. The main camp was at the top of Chapel Hill in the fields on both sides of the Acton Road. Because this camp was within such easy walking distance to the village, troops stationed there were the most frequent visitors to the village's cafes and bars. As with Drumbanagher the officers were billeted in the 'Big House' itself. Betty Best, daughter of the owner, Jack Best has written a memoir of those days - a bygone world dominated by rigid class divisions, even in war time. Excerpts from her memoir have

appeared in Number XIII of *"Before I Forget"*. She wrote of the Americans ..., *"They came with money to burn, nylon stockings (very much sought after) and candy. They were clearly used to more than the village had to offer - no taxis, no buses. "We wouldn't put up with this back home". They were, however, very generous and for that well-liked."*

The American troops there held several parties for local children, where one of the main attractions was, of course, American *candy*.



Union Lodge: Officers' Training School

Part of the home of Joe and Maggie Hall, who owned Hall's Grocery shop in Church Street, was given over from 1940-1942 as a billet for Major and Mrs Newton. Major Newton was head of the Officers' Training Camp at Union Lodge. To make room for the Newtons, the Hall's daughter Cora, then aged 15, was sent to live with her Grandmother Margaret and Aunt, Eileen Young, out in the Fourtowns. The Newtons took over the front of Hall's house, both upstairs and downstairs; the sitting room and a bedroom. They employed a maid, Mollie Kennedy (later Mollie Trainor) to come in and cook for them. The Halls regarded the Newtons as *"very uppity"*.

Union Lodge seems to have been used solely as an Officers' Training School for the British Army until D-Day in 1944 when all British units went to France. One little known fact about this Training School is that General McKenna, Chief of Staff for the Irish Free State Army during WW2, regularly visited British officers in Belfast in 1942 and that twelve Irish Free State Army officers came for training with the British Special Forces' officers at Union Lodge.



The Fireplace of the Officers' Mess, Acton camp.

The locals seem to have been united in the welcome they extended to the troops for they soon made their presence felt and were frequent customers in the various cafes and tea-rooms which had sprung up in the village. They also attended the dances which were arranged in Rafferty's Loft, the Royal British Legion Hall and Drumbanagher Church Hall. Sometimes their attendance at dances led to friction between them and young local men and the Military Police had to be called on to quell disturbances.

In November 1942, a Grand Variety Concert followed by a dance was held in the Legion Hall to welcome the troops. Local artistes, including Master Billy Harvey, Miss Aileen Kennedy and Victor Gilliland were joined by British Army Sappers Mitchell, Butler and Hynes and by US Army Privates Walter Hanzik (*trick accordionist!*), Stanley Cartwright, and concert pianist, Ignace Perricone.

400 troops attended the event, which was presided over by the local priest Fr. Patrick Gallagher, with Canon Nelson, Rev Thomas Coulter and several other ministers also present. Following a '*sumptuous supper*' dancing to the music of Fred Hanna and his Band continued until near morning. The organising committee of this event included such dignitaries as Sam English, Tommy Mackle, David Bicker, Joe Lennon, Jack Wright and R.M. Watt.

Sadly, as stated above, just a week later, Rev Coulter died when his bicycle collided with American Army truck on the Markethill Road.

Belgian Troops

D Day in June 1944 brought that particular era to an end here, for the American and British troops had gone from the local camps and were fully occupied on mainland Europe. However, early in 1945 and following the liberation of Belgium, a large number of young Belgians arrived and moved into Acton and Union Lodge camps. Initially they could scarcely be called troops, for the majority were simply conscripted young men who were sent here to train as soldiers. There are many tales of how bedraggled and malnourished these young men were when they disembarked at Poyntzpass Station on their arrival.



Belgian Troops

Of all the troops stationed here, it was the Belgians who were most fondly remembered. There was great sympathy for these young men who had spent their youth under the oppression of the Nazis. They greatly appreciated their new freedom and were grateful for any little kindnesses they received. In many cases local people welcomed them into their homes and forged friendships which endured for many years.

Unlike Lt.Col. Robert Snetzer, who was at Drumbanagher here during a cold, wet winter, the Belgians were here for what proved to be an exceptionally good summer.

With the threat of invasion long gone, discipline was light, so, while they trained and got fit, they were well fed and largely carefree. One young Belgian, Francois Brichot, who spent six months at Acton Camp, wrote in a '*Memoire*',

“When I returned to Belgium in September 1945, my mother hardly recognized me for I was nearly two inches taller and had gained more than two stone in weight!”

The plan had been that these young men, once fit and trained, would join the war effort in Europe or in the Far East but, fortunately, by the time they were ready for action, the war had ended. A number of those stationed here were university students who were de-mobbed in December 1945 and allowed to return to their studies while others, including Francois Bricnot, spent some time in Germany as part of the army of occupation.

One tragic incident occurred on September 7th 1945 when a Belgian Bren-gun carrier went out of control on Rafe’s Hill and killed 87 year-old Peter Campbell who was sitting on the roadside opposite his home.



Living accommodation in a Nissen hut.

Refugees

Following the bombing of Belfast in April 1941, an estimated 60,000 women and children were evacuated from the city and sought refuge in the country. Unlike in England where generally it was only the children who were sent from the major towns and cities in groups with a teacher or other adult to guide them to a safe destination and see then billeted with families or individuals, here mothers generally accompanied their children and stayed with them. A number were accommodated locally in habitable empty houses. In one or two instances the refugees settled here and stayed on after the war but, generally, it seems that most

found the quietness of the countryside and the remoteness from shops etc. unbearable, and most soon returned to the city.



Prisoners of War

Not far away, at Gosford Markethill and Elmfield, Gilford there were at one time in the region of 1,800 German and Italian Prisoners-of-War whose presence added to the general air of excitement. It is believed that some of these prisoners worked voluntarily at a quarry on the Markethill Road just outside Poyntzpass.

In March 1945 four POWs escaped from the Elmfield Camp. Amid great local excitement and alarm, a huge search operation began involving soldiers, police and the general public. Two were recaptured that night at Tandragee while the other two men, Horst Zimmerman and Ferdinand Kanowski, remained at large for two more days but were caught just outside Poyntzpass on the Tandragee Road at what is known as “the Wee Wood”. It was believed that they were attempting to get to the neutral Free State by following the railway line.



Civil Defence Flag

Many locals, particularly those with practical skills, participated in what was called **The Civil Defence**. Their role was to provide basic services during war-time in areas such as fire-fighting and first aid, as well as ensuring that regulations such as the black-out were observed. They received some basic training and were given pumps and hoses and an ambulance as well as stretchers and



Jerrettspass Home Guard

some other equipment. The fire-fighters trained by pumping water from the Ball Alley River and Canal at Poyntzpass and the Connywarry in Acton and the First Aid crews by bandaging ‘casualties’.

Another group of men active locally were the **Home Guard**. The Home Guard in Northern Ireland differed in several ways from the image of “*Dad’s Army*” popular on TV. We have to bear in mind that Partition was less than twenty years earlier and that Northern Ireland was still far from secure. Already in existence here was the “B Special Constabulary” and with the establishment of the Home Guard, the members of the B Specials simply continued to operate under a new title and in new uniforms. The local Home Guard was not totally synonymous with the ‘B’ Specials for others joined them for the duration of the war but the command structures remained as before. One local platoon was commanded by the celebrated Sam English, who was more of a ‘Captain Mainwaring’ character than that Arthur Lowe’s portrayal. Such was the apparent level of this group’s incompetence that a regular-army cousin of Betty Best who visited her and observed the group in action, advised her that, in the event of a German invasion and a

choice having to be made between going with Sam English’s Home Guard platoon or going with the Germans, she should, “*Go with the Germans!*” In Britain more than 87,000 young women volunteered and became what was known as the **Women’s Land Army** or “**Land Girls**”.

In Northern Ireland the number was only about 30. However a few of them did work locally. George Bryson had a dairy and milk-bottling plant and a number of young women volunteers worked there for a while.

How did the local community cope with/benefit from such a massive influx of strangers?

As well as welcoming such an influx of ‘strangers’ into an area where for generations there had been population stability, and where everybody knew everybody, people had to get used to carrying gas-masks, and Identity Cards, Ration Books and observing travel restrictions and the black-out. So how did locals cope?

The answer to that must be “Remarkably well”. People were ready to be hospitable and friendly when treated with respect. They appreciated the

danger the country was in and knew that the day would come when the young men stationed here might well have to risk their lives in the war. So they were very welcoming to the various troops. As well as the welcoming concert mentioned above there were other events organised to extend a welcome and the American troops reciprocated by organising a number of parties for local children. Also there were several ways in which the local economy received a boost.



The Land Girls

Several cafes sprang up in the village. There was a cafe in the Court House, Carson's 'Central cafe,' 'Aunty McCourt's Tea Rooms in Church Street, Mary and Hannah Sands' 'Emerald Café' in Meeting Street, and sisters Sarah and Rose Ellen Conlon in Chapel Street.

Several taxis came into existence: Willie Bicker, Peter McCreash, Danny Trainor, Felix Daly and others with motor cars were constantly employed ferrying soldiers to and from the station and to dances and cinemas. Petrol was a problem but there were ways and means of overcoming the difficulties.

Smuggling across the Irish Free State border was one source of income. Sugar and whiskey were two prized commodities much more available in the South but all sorts of 'luxury' goods were also smuggled. As well, bottles of whiskey were said to be diluted with tea but that American soldiers didn't seem to notice.

Feeding the huge number of young men was a massive undertaking with a ready market for all sorts of local produce. Some locals grew vegetables to sell to the army. Eggs were in big demand.

Edmond Soar in his diary recorded that he bought eggs from a local lady and Blache Kellett said that American soldiers came to her father's house daily wanting to buy eggs.

The building of the aerodrome at Cranfield, some 25 miles away provided a great deal of work for local lorry owners. The main runway was a mile and a half long, 30 yards wide and with concrete 6 - 9 ft thick so a lot of sand, gravel and cement was needed. Bob Carson and the Trainor Brothers 'drew' a lot to Cranfield. Locally the Drumbanagher avenue was also concreted.

What happened to the soldiers stationed around here?

The Engineers of both British and American Armies followed the troops immediately after D Day. They were employed defusing mines and building bridges. They were combat troops and when the going got tough they were called on to act as ordinary soldiers.

Les Kellett's regiment of the Royal Artillery saw much action including the famous Battle of Arnhem. He survived the war as did his colleague David Womersley and came to live here, becoming an outstanding member of the local community. The American 2nd Engineers landed on Omaha Beach on D Day +3. Snetzer recorded that it was littered with casualties and debris. His battalion suffered heavy casualties and he was seriously wounded but recovered to re-join his colleagues. After the war he resumed his career as an engineer in Mobile, Alabama and died there in 1993.

The other diarist at Drumbanagher, Edmund Qear, survived the war but in a seriously crippled condition. He was very seriously wounded during the Battle of the Bulge. His injuries left him totally disabled. He returned to the USA a cripple to discover that his fiancée no longer wanted to know him. He died in Monterey, Mexico in 1946 in unexplained circumstances. His story was told in the film 'Flowers for the Soldier' that the Local History Society watched here some years ago. The young Belgians who trained here never saw action as such as the war ended while they were here. Many returned to civilian life almost immediately they returned to Belgium. Francois Brichot became a commercial traveller.



Francois Brichot

Visible Reminders of World War II Today

The **pillboxes** remain at Loughadian and Scarva, otherwise relics of WW 2 are not easily spotted. At **Drumbanagher** there are extensive remains of buildings and Nissen hut bases but they are completely invisible, overgrown by trees and laurel. On the pillars of the gates at the Newry Road entrance are some initials carved into the stone by sentries. The concrete driveway remains but it is in poor condition.

At **Dromantine**: hardly anything remains. The base of what was once the canteen can be found overgrown by moss etc.

At **Union Lodge** the bases of the Nissen huts were broken up during General Nesbitt's time and used to build walls and to pave patios. However, some sheds built at that time are now used as outhouses.

The only real remains at **Acton** are the bases of two huts and the fire place of what was once the Officer's Mess.

Following the war the government sold off the redundant Nissen huts and they were used by farmers as hay sheds and stores. A few remain, although the original corrugated iron has been replaced once or twice. The local Catholic community bought a large Nissen hut at the top of Chapel Hill and it was used as a Parochial Hall for thirty years.



The Pillbox at Scarva

Some local memories of the war

The following are just a few of the people who shared their memories of the war with us. If you have any stories that were passed down in your family we would be very glad to hear them.....

Norman Purdy: *Our house was at Doyle's Hill. I remember my mother sending me out with cups of tea for the soldiers. I remember that the soldiers used 'McComb's Field' on the left hand side leaving Poyntzpass out the Blackbridge Road, as a training site with 12 foot wide ditches, barbed wire entanglements, etc.as target areas to practise attacking and defending. People were in danger of their lives on the roads at night, what with the blackout, all vehicles including bicycles operating without lights and the Americans' confusion both at the narrowness of the roads and driving "on the wrong side".*



Max Close: *The avenue from the main road up was concreted before the Americans came. There were three gates into the demesne and it was believed that one lorry out of every four which was checked in through one gate went out through another gate without stopping!*

Many of the American sentries, being city reared, were frequently unnerved by country sounds in the pitch black night. One sentry, hearing rustling in the bushes, demanded, "Who goes there?" When no reply was heard, he fired in the general direction of the noise and shot a goat belonging to Hughie Ferris, tenant at gatehouse at the main gates. Hughie was given 5 guineas compensation, after which it was said he put all his goats out each night in hopes of some more being shot!



Hughie Ferris



Vincent Canavan: *I remember the Pioneers coming to the top of the Chapel Hill. There were black Americans at Dromantine but we only saw them passing through in the back of trucks. The Americans were big drinkers and regularly caused trouble by being drunk at dances in Rafferty's loft. Father Gallagher would try to keep order. One time when a row broke out some locals chased an American soldier across the street. They say he jumped over the wall into Magill's yard and broke his two legs. The Americans would go to Belfast on the six train and come back at eleven. Usually they had been drinking and were half-mad. They would be mad looking for taxis. Locals sold them big bottles of whiskey that were half tea. They didn't seem to notice. There was supposed to be men killed in an explosion at Drumbanagher but there was never a word about it. (This was certainly the incident that Snetzer recorded in his diary and an example of the censorship at the time)*

Nan Harvey: *There was an American soldier called Ignace Pericone stationed at Drumbanagher. He was a concert pianist in civilian life. He had arranged with my father to come to our house in Railway Street to practise on our piano. He came several times a week and play for hours and hours. He was very talented and he proposed to me but while we corresponded after he left Drumbanagher, I didn't want to marry him.*

Maura Devlin (Kelly): *I was born in January 1922 on the Falls Road in Belfast. After I left school I did a course in shorthand, book-keeping and typing and got a job in a firm called 'Shroud Manufacturers Limited'. On the night of the great Blitz, Easter Tuesday April 1941, my sister and I were at a concert in the Ulster Hall. The star of the show was Delia Murphy who was Ireland's top popular singer at the time. There were several other supporting acts. We had saved up for our tickets which seemed very expensive at the time but it was a very popular show and we very felt lucky to get tickets. Shortly after the show began, the sirens went off which meant that an air raid was taking place. We could hear the noises from outside but the band played louder drowned a lot of it out. We were moved to what was supposed to be the safest parts of the Hall and Delia Murphy continued on. There was no panic. And then after a while an air-raid warden came in and announced that a large bomb had fallen in the street close to the Hall but hadn't exploded and that no one was to leave the*



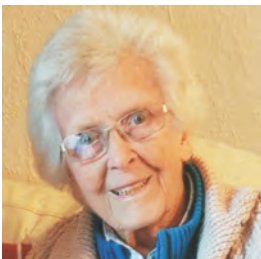
“
*I was in the middle
of the Blitz, I didn't
see it at all.*”

building until it was dealt with. A young man and a young girl begged to be let out and because of circumstances at their home they were let go. Unfortunately both were killed on their way to the Antrim Road. It was after 6 o'clock in the morning when we were allowed to leave. Delia Murphy and the other artistes had performed all night. There was an enormous crater in the road outside the Hall. If you had fallen into it you could never get out. They put planks across part of it to let us out. We had to go home by the Grosvenor Road. Looking back we could see the flames shooting up into the sky. Our mother had been distracted with worry all night for she

A young Maura Devlin

knew we were in the city centre. So oddly enough while I was in the middle of the Blitz, I didn't see it at all.

When the war ended there was great relief and celebrations. We went singing and dancing hand-in-hand in the streets. There was a great feeling of freedom.



Teasy Hudson (Gartland): *I was born in 1929 in the grounds of Dromantine House. It belonged to the African Missionary Society and at the time and there were more than 60 students there. My father, Frank Gartland, was in charge of the cattle, I remember that one day in the autumn of 1939, my sister Benni, May Quinn (Reed) and I were gathering blackberries down at the Dog-kennel Wood, where May's family lived at the time. She went into the house for something and when she came out she told us that the war had started. She said that her brother Brian and our brother John would have to join as both were 16. John joined the navy and sadly was killed in Ceylon and Brian went to work in England.*

The First troops to come were Irish Fusiliers. They lived in tents while the huts were being built. They were nearly all from the south of Ireland. After them came a Scottish regiment, the Cameron Highlanders. After them came black American soldiers. They were the first black people we had ever seen and at first I was afraid of them but of course they were generally very nice, polite and friendly. I remember the great piles of ammunition right along the sides of the avenue. The piles were so high I couldn't see over them. There were thousands of what, I thought, were big bullets but they were in fact shells. We had to have 'passports' to get back home after school but after a while the sentries got to know us.

Edwin Bryson: *The concrete bases of the Nissen huts at Union Lodge were broken up during General Nesbitt's time and used to build patios and terraces around the house. The little red-brick house, down at the lake side, which is known as 'the boathouse', was actually built by the military as a pump house to pump water up to the House.*

Bridie McVeigh (Bagnall): *I remember the huge piles of ammunition stacked right along the length of the avenue. The laurel bushes had been cut back in such a way as to camouflage these stockpiles from the air. We lived at Glen Chapel and we walked to school at Derrycraw Public Elementary School a distance of about two miles. Going to school and coming home we often met huge tanks and trucks on the narrow road. We were very scared of them. My uncle Pat lived at the main entrance into Dromantine and we occasionally visited him. I remember that once when we were there a fight broke out between some black soldiers. They were using knives. We were taken into the house. My aunt witnessed it and said there was blood everywhere but whether the injuries were fatal or superficial she never heard. She said the Military Police dealt with it.*

“They were very taken with Irish girls with red hair”

Later I went to live with an aunt in Newcastle. She did laundering for some American soldiers. They insisted on razor-sharp creases in their trousers. They were very taken with Irish girls with red hair. If I'd been a bit older, who knows! After the war, one of the soldiers my aunt laundered for sent me a beautiful pen and pencil set.

Eleanor Moody (McMillen): *I wasn't born till after the war had ended but my family was evacuated from Belfast after the Blitz. My parents Jimmy and Peggy McMillen had lived at Glengormley but moved to the country with their four children in 1941. My grandparents lived on Ravenhill Road which was a dangerous area, although their house wasn't damaged in the air-raid. They too, moved here. First of all they lived at Rose Cottage on the Loughadian Road but then moved to a large two-storey house near Eric Smart's. My parents lived for a while in a gatekeeper's cottage at Drumbanagher but may have moved to the Loughadian area for two of my brothers attended Fourtowns Primary School for a time and my father worked for Sam English.*



Colin Baxter: *We lived in Church Street at the time. I remember the night the evacuees came here. They came in buses and trucks. They were all assembled up at the Legion Hall. My mother made a big pot of porridge and brought it up to them. At one stage I got lost – I was only about four or five – and they eventually found me among the evacuees. I remember that several British officers were billeted in Hudson's (Rice's Hotel) and that one day when I was walking down past Hudson's one of officers opened an upstairs window and gave me a lovely fishing rod. Paddy McSherry was very much involved in the Civil Defence. So was R.M. Watt. They held their meetings in a house belonging to Tom Loughlin. Their job was to provide emergency services locally. They were responsible for Fire and Rescue and First Aid, They had some training and had*

an ambulance of some sort and they practised regularly. On one occasion I was used as a patient or casualty. I was bandaged up and put on a stretcher. I was taken by ambulance up to the camp on top of the Chapel Hill and back down again. I don't think the Civil Defence was responsible for the black-out. I think the police looked after that. My brothers David and Neville were in the Home Guard and they would go to rifle practice sometimes.

“I was bandaged up and put on a stretcher”

The Belgians were well-liked. Some visited our house regularly.

One Sunday morning my brother David, who had joined the air-cadets, was in a little plane that landed in a field up the Old Road. The pilot sent David to the 'Pass for cigarettes. A big number of locals went to see the aeroplane.

Brid Heron (Murphy): *A Belgian soldier called Jules Gerard visited our house very regularly and we became very good friends. When he returned to Belgium, for almost twenty years thereafter, my mother and he exchanged Christmas cards.*

John Magennis: *I remember that one day on my way home from school that as I was passing the station a black soldier with a rifle was standing there. He asked me to sing a song for him. I sang "Hello, Patsy Fegan!" and he gave me three or four shillings."*

Griffith Wylie: *When the American soldiers were here, my family became friendly with one young fellow called Ralph Nielsen from Chicago Illinois. He was stationed at Acton Camp at the time. He would often drop into our house for a cup of tea and a chat. After he left here I lost touch with him but often wondered what had become of him, for I knew he would have been involved in the D Day landing. One day in 1967 I was in the office of the grocer's shop in Railway Street when I heard someone with an American accent speaking to Jim Whiteside out in the shop. In a moment, Jim came to the office door to say that there was an old friend would like to see me. Imagine my surprise for it was Ralph! I recognised him immediately. He had come with his wife to show her some of the places he'd been in the war and Poyntzpass was the place he remembered most fondly as such a welcoming place. He came out to the house and met the family and we had a great evening catching up on all the years between. He took a lot of photographs and sent me copies and we promised to keep in touch and we did. The*

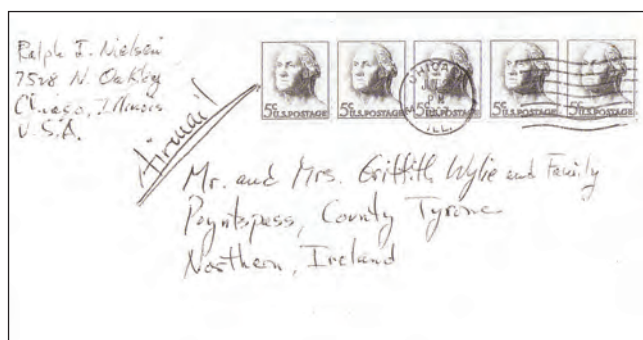


soldiers were always looking for eggs and vegetables and I remember that our garden was full of cabbages which my mother sold to the soldiers.

Phil Watters: I remember that one day when an army tank or bren-gun carrier was going along the Back Lane, the road gave way and it crashed through the bank and hedge into what we call 'Hall's Bank'. This is the steep field that runs to a point between the Newry Road and the Back Lane. It uprooted the hawthorns and left a big gap in the hedge. As the field was so steep they couldn't pull the vehicle up the slope so they lowered



it down to the main road, using another tank as a brake. They had to open a gap in the hedge to get it out. Where the tank went through the hedge at the top of the field they had to build a retaining wall to stop the road crumbling into the field. The wall is still there. The gate they put in the gap at the Newry Road is still there too, but I don't think anyone ever used it from that day to this.

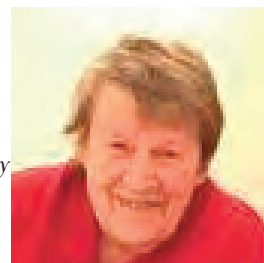


Poyntzpass, County Tyrone!

Two Belgian soldiers, Etienne Raquez and Hubert Lousberg, used to visit our family several evenings each week. At first they hadn't great English but would sit at the fire making what conversation they could and enjoying the tea with the family. I was learning to be an altar-boy at Mass at the time. The Mass was in Latin back then and the altar servers had to know the Latin responses. It was Hubert Lousberg who taught me the responses, some of which I still remember. I think back in Belgium Hubert was a university student. I remember that one time when my brother Frank was sick Etienne brought him a duck egg, (Etienne Raquez, died in 2012 aged 93 years)

Johnny Minnis: Johnny Minnis, had the unsavory task of clearing out the latrines at Drumbanagher and Dromantine every day with a donkey and cart. Johnny, despite appearances, was a very intelligent man with a razor sharp wit. He was once referred to by a self-important American officer by a very demeaning nickname. Johnny replied that if the officer and his American colleagues' fighting abilities were in direct proportion to the amount of excrement they produced each day, "the war would be over in a week!" (Johnny put it more bluntly!)

Rachel Henry (King): I lived in the family home at Lurgana, Whitecross. Ours was a big house and at various times we had Scottish, English and Americans stationed there. The officers lived in rooms in the house while the men camped in the grounds. Following the blitz in Belfast, two families came to live in part of the house. There were just women and children. They only stayed a week. They couldn't cope with the silence and the lack of urban amenities. They regarded the place as too remote and after a week a place was found for them in Newry. My mother said that while they were with us the number of eggs our hens laid fell off dramatically - or so it seemed! Sometimes officers joined the family for tea on Sundays. Later on the Belgians were stationed there and at one time a group of soldiers organised a party for local children. My two brothers went and had a great time but I was off school sick, and couldn't go.



John Campbell: When the Americans first came to Drumbanagher, some of them had no idea of the value of our money and, no doubt, there were some people ready to take advantage of them. One day an American soldier came to our house to buy eggs from my mother. He offered her a £5 note for a dozen of eggs. She was really shocked and explained to him his mistake. She charged him half-a-crown, which was a very good price for a dozen of eggs at that time.

I remember that often soldiers and their girlfriends would come walking up past our house from the direction of the Crack Bridge. I think they had walked along the Canal Bank from Poyntzpass. When they parted, the soldiers would climb over the wall and run up the field back to the camp. I'm not sure where the girlfriends went.

Blanche Kellett (Whiteside): I was born in 1922 and attended Drumbanagher School until I was 14. After that I helped on my father's small farm. I met my future husband, Leslie Kellett, at a dance in the Legion Hall. Leslie was from Yorkshire and was in the Royal Artillery. His company was stationed in Nissen huts at Drumbanagher for almost a year. In the course of that year we became friendly and romance blossomed. My parents liked Leslie for when he came to see me he was always ready and able to do odd jobs around the farm. In civilian life, before the war, he had been a joiner. He specialised in making coffins. He used to tell me that when he had finished making a coffin, he would get into it to test it and sometimes have a nap in there. I thought that was awful but he said it was only a box!

When Leslie's regiment was ordered back to England it was "make up your mind" time for us and so early on the morning that Leslie was due to leave, we married in St Mary's Church, Drumbanagher. None of his soldier-friends knew of our plans as Leslie feared they would play pranks and cause a disturbance. We didn't even tell the taxi driver, Feily Daly, that we were



getting married. When he realised he said, "If only you had told me, I would have washed the car!"

Leslie went to England and I stayed here for a while. After D Day he was involved in many fierce actions in Europe, including Arnhem but was very lucky for, although he had many near shaves, he was never wounded. After the war ended he was posted to Holland and there was befriended by a family called Bekeron. They more or less adopted him and welcomed him into their home. After the war Leslie and the Bekerons kept in touch and the friendship has continued through several generations, right down to the present day. In fact I had a phone call from one of the family on Monday. (2nd October 2014)

Roger Magennis: After the blitz in Belfast an elderly lady called Miss Lynch came from the city to our house in William Street and stayed with us till the war ended.



Roger Magennis

John Lennon: During the war, an English officer, Major Tanner, his wife and batman stayed in our house in Loughadian. Major Tanner was involved in the training at Union Lodge. Many of the young men he trained there became casualties when they moved to the front. Major

Tanner was very anxious to be involved himself but, unfortunately, he was killed shortly after leaving Union Lodge. My mother and Mrs. Tanner became great friends and corresponded for years after the war. I remember my mother parcelling up chickens and sending them to Mrs. Tanner by post. I remember the day that old Peter Campbell was killed. I think some big piece of equipment, which was being towed, broke off and unfortunately killed the old man who was sitting at the side of the road. It was the talk of the country for days.

Paul Murray: My Uncle Terry Murray told me the following: One day, shortly after the Belgians arrived in Poyntzpass, a Belgian soldier came into Auntie McCourt's café in Church Street. He had no English, it seems, but somehow ordered a meal. When he had finished, Auntie McCourt attempted to make him understand that he had to pay and that the meal cost half-a-crown. She pointed to the price on the wall, but he still didn't seem to understand. So she went to wherever she kept the money and brought a half-crown and showed it to him. She held it up in front of him. He smiled and took it saying, "Danke! Danke! Souvenir!" He then bowed and away he went.



**'Auntie' McCourt's Tearoom,
Church Street.**

Annie Smyth (Trainor): I left school in 1938 and worked at home helping my mother. We kept lodgers in our house especially round the time of the fair, so there was always plenty to do. When the war started there were always soldiers coming in for tea. My brother Peter was friendly with an American soldier called Frank Kori and he was a regular customer. My sister Maureen married an English soldier who was stationed at Drumbanagher at the same time as Leslie Kellett. His name was David Wormersley. He was from Halifax in Yorkshire where his people were bakers. They were famous for making pies. Maureen and David met at a dance in the Legion Hall. After he returned to England with his company, they kept up their relationship and, when he got three days leave, he came back and they were married one morning in Loughbrickland Chapel. My parents didn't approve of the relationship at first, for they didn't know anything about David. They needn't have worried.

Another sister, Madge, was in England during the war but the boys were all at home. They had a lorry and were busy drawing stones and sand when aerodromes were being constructed at Aldergrove and Cranfield. My brother Danny had a car and did a good bit of taxi-ing although he didn't really have a taxi. I remember that Bobby Minnis was in the Home Guard and I think Sam English was in command. Mr. Watt, who had a gents' outfitters in Railway Street, was the head of the Civil Defence.

One day a rumour started, and spread around, that the 'Pass was going to be bombed that night because there were so many camps here. I don't know who started it but some people believed it and took their children and spent the night at the Windmill Stump. We knew nothing about it but I remember the next morning seeing a lot of people coming down the fields.

The Geary children from Liverpool were evacuated here. They came to stay with Barney and Sarah Ann Murphy in Killysavan. The Murphys got word that the children were to arrive at Poyntzpass Station on a certain day. Barney and Sarah Ann waited at the station all day but trains came and went but no children got off. After the last train, Barney and Sarah Ann went home

very concerned. Much later, in the middle of the night, the three children arrived at their door in Killysavan. What had happened was that the children had gone on past Poyntzpass and got off at Goraghwood. They didn't know which station they were at, for during the war all the station names had been removed. Anyway they got directions at Goraghwood and walked back to Killysavan in the middle of the night. They were totally exhausted. They had labels round their necks saying who they were and where they were going.



William Morrow: The earliest memory I have about WW2 is when the British Pioneer Corps came to the 'Pass to build the huts on the Chapel Hill and at Drumbanagher. They stick in my memory because I always wanted – but never got – one of their brass cap badges. Some Royal Engineers were there also. They were all a mixture of English, Scots and Welsh soldiers. In the 'Pass at the time there were very few cars so we weren't used to a lot of traffic except for the occasional coal lorry or bread or mineral van, so we were inundated with army vehicles the worst of which were medium-sized tanks known as bren-gun carriers. They were very noisy and their steel tracks tore up the streets. At the time a number of cafes opened up in the 'Pass to make a little money out of the soldiers. Mrs. McCourt, known to one and all as 'Auntie', Mrs. Carson, who already had a dining room on fair-days, Maura Canavan and most popular of all with the soldiers, Rose and Sarah Conlon's.

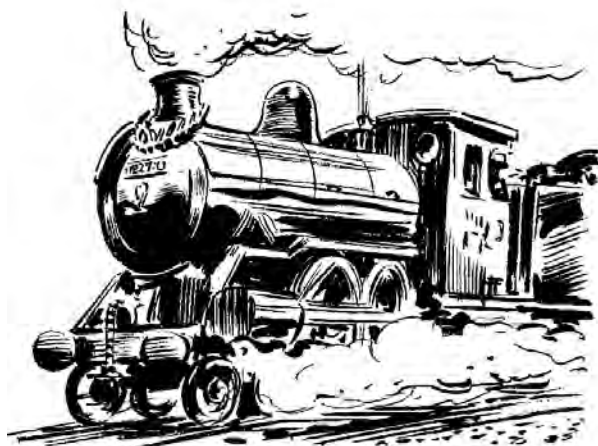
My worst memory is that of a young British dispatch rider on a motor cycle from Drumbanagher to the Chapel Hill crashing into an army lorry coming down Meeting Street right at the corner. The poor fellow was covered with blood and yelling in pain for his mother. There were very few phones in the village then. The phone-box was in the Post Office behind where the letter box was and to call the hospital you had to get Gertie Little or Gladys Gillespie to contact Daisy Hill for an ambulance, which seemed to take forever. I never did know if the young fellow survived or not but he was alive when he was taken away.

Shortly after that the Civil Defence Corps and Red Cross were formed in the 'Pass. Some of those involved were Davy Alexander and Mrs Lyness who lived next to Henry Clarke's shop in the Far Pass and of course, Nurse Best. They set up a First Aid Post in Tom Loughlin's where the bank was on fair-days and Saturdays. I remember that Davy wore a blue uniform and that the women had white aprons and caps.



Cap Badge of the Pioneer Corps

Canavan's Railway Bar & Off Sales



7, Railway Street, Poyntzpass