

Countdown to D-Day ... 6 June 1944

by Joan Black

Our Village was quiet. “The Boys” – Paratroopers of the U.S. 101st Airborne Division stationed at Raniket Camp adjacent to the Village – were confined to Camp. This, we knew from prior such incidents, was a prelude to disappearing for 10 days - two weeks on “maneuvers” – Military Speak for training for the invasion of Europe.

This particular evening was typical of many evenings. We, Mother, Father, little sister and I gathered in the living room listening to the BBC nightly news. Suddenly there was a tap-tap-tap on the French doors leading out into the garden. Startled, we glanced at each other “Whatwasthat?” Again, tap-tap-tap and a whispered voice, “Ed? Ed?”

Someone was calling my Dad. He turned off the light and drew back the black-out draperies. There stood Wally and George, two of the Paratroopers we had “adopted”. Quickly Pop unlocked the door and they slid inside. “The others are on their way” they told us and just then Mac and Red appeared out of the shadows and came in too. “We’re sort of AWOL” they said with a grin. “Had to sneak out. Wanted to come by and say ‘Hi’ as it may be a while before we get to see you again.”

We understood this to mean that The Invasion was imminent although no-one spoke the actual words. “Boys, caps” my Mother reminded them – she did not allow hats to be worn in the house. Sheepishly, glancing at each other they took off their caps and we gasped. Everyone of them had a Mohawk haircut! “The whole Squad got them” Red explained. Mac chimed in and because his mama had raised him to be a nice, polite boy, he put it this way “We’re gonna scare the snot outta those freakin’ Nazis!”

We could imagine, with camouflage paint on their faces and an Indian Warrior hairdo they would, indeed, be a frightening sight. They described how they had snuck out of Camp through a gap in the high, prickly hedge that surrounded the Camp, taken a circuitous route across the field that bordered our back fence and then come up through the garden.

“This definitely calls for a toast” said my Pop and he reached into the cupboard and dug out one of the precious bottles of Scotch he had stored away against the day when we would drink to Victory and Peace. But now we raised our glasses to “The Men of the 101st Godspeed and Safe Return.” We clinked glasses then it was time for hugs and kisses all around and again the lights were turned out, the door opened and off they went, leaving us unsettled and sad. Then five minutes later, tap-tap-tap! Now What? Again we let them in. They had just reached our fence and were about to cross the field when they realized the field was swarming with Military Police! Apparently there had been a mass break-out from Camp and the MP’s were patrolling the street in Jeeps and combing the fields looking for all the men who had taken off! How were they going to get back onto Base without getting caught? We huddled, and came up with a plan.

1 My Mother, a plump, matronly little lady, donned her hat and coat, grabbed a wicker shopping basket and Wally put on my Dad's cap and held the dog on a leash and off down the road they trotted. In the black-out they were just another typical British couple on their way home. When they reached a safe spot Wally handed back the cap and the dog and scrambled back through the hedge. Mother returned home.

#2 We gave Mac a bright wool scarf to drape around his neck, he wore Pop's Fedora and carried a large shopping bag. He and I walked arm in arm while George walked alongside pushing Pop's bicycle – just some villagers who had been out visiting friends. I rode the bike home.

#3 On the previous two trips we had noticed an awful lot of activity. Several knots of neighbors out walking their dogs, pushing baby buggies, all heading down the hill in the direction of the camp. Yes, the whole Village was smuggling "their boys" back into Camp. Red was the only one left to make the run. Again we pressed the dog into service and also my young sister who held Red's hand and walked beside him like a good little girl out with her daddy. Mother and I making up the rest of the "diversion" party.

Of course, none of this would have been possible if the patrolling Jeeps had headlights, but all any cars had were mere slits of light, just so they could be seen, not to illuminate the roadway.

You know, when we talked among ourselves in the weeks that followed the Invasion, we often speculated that those MP's could not possibly have been that dumb that they ignored so many people out walking and on bicycles when normally the streets were deserted after dark. But most likely they themselves had stopped in to bid farewell to their particular adoptive families – and just turned a blind eye.